

The Power of the Pulpit

Faithfulness of God

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This morning, I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Samuel 2 in the Old Testament. Today, if you've joined us as a guest or a visitor, or maybe you didn't have the opportunity to be with us last week, I want to welcome you to a journey through a book of the Bible known as 1 Samuel, and really under the auspice of the faithfulness of God. And here is why: what we see in 1 Samuel is an eerie parallel of what we're experiencing even in our world, in our culture today. You see the people of God very slowly but strategically drifting from living under the judges that God appointed to the kings that look just like everybody else. In fact, kind of one of the themes throughout 1 Samuel is this drift from the sacred to the secular, yet at the same time we discover that in spite of the environment around them, God is still faithful to those who call out his name and to those who were true to his name. Today, as we come to chapter 2 of 1 Samuel, we're going to be introduced very formally to the priest Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, those who were supposed to represent the Lord in a setting much like this; when the people gathered to worship, these were the men that were in charge and today, I want to give you a statement that you may or may not be familiar with. It's one of those that we really don't know who originated but goes a little something like this: as goes the pulpit, so goes the pew. As goes the pew, so goes the nation.

That being said, today I want to talk about from 1 Samuel 2, the power of the pulpit. Now a few introductory comments before we read chapter 2, beginning in verse 12, and the first one is this: when I use the word pulpit today, I want to pull our culture out of it and speak biblically. In Nehemiah 9, we have the only reference in the Bible to what we know as a pulpit. It's the only time it's mentioned. The Israelites have come out of captivity, they've reestablished themselves in the land, and Nehemiah and Ezra are establishing the corporate worship of the people of God and there in Nehemiah 9, it says that he stood upon a pulpit. Not behind. That is a Western cultural thing where we have some type of apparatus to put our notes, our Bible and such, and so oftentimes people come to me and they say, "Pastor, why don't you use a pulpit?" I say, "I use one every time I preach," because biblically speaking, as long as I'm standing on something, it's a pulpit. Now, why do I focus upon that? Because today when we talk about and I use the word pulpit, I don't want you to think a piece of wood or clear Plexiglas, I want you to think of a time where individuals stand before others and they declare "truth and/or error."

The second thing I want to address is this" the term nation. Talk about as the pulpit goes so goes the pew, as the pew so goes the nation. In fact, in Psalm 33:12 it says, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." In the Bible, the word nation does not necessarily mean geopolitical boundaries. Don't think sovereign states. In fact, what did Jesus tell us in Acts 1? "Go into all nations." What does it say in Revelation 7? There are people that believe from all nations. We need to think more people groups, we need to think humanity in its entirety. And so the pulpit determines eventually what happens among the people, and finally, in spite of what we're about to read, we're going to discover that God is faithful, and in spite of what you and I are navigating in our own lives today, God is still faithful.

Beginning in verse 12 of 1 Samuel 2, it says,

12 Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD. 13 And the priests' custom with the people was, that, when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a fleshhook of three teeth in his hand; 14 And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. 15 Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. 16 And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force. 17 Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.

Fast forward to verse 22.

22 Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. 23 And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. 24 Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD'S people to transgress. 25 If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them. 26 And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the LORD, and also with men.

And let's just come to a very common agreement: these sons are a piece of work and here they are, the representatives of, the priests, in our context today, they are the pastors of the congregation known as Israel, and today I want to talk about how do you and I, how do we identify like-mindedness in our world? How do we identify what was happening in

1 Samuel 2 in our own context? How do we learn from this story? And hopefully how do we see it changed in our own lives? So what are the marks of a Hophni and Phineas? How do we know when we're in the presence of, when we're listening to, when we're reading individuals that are walking along the same path as these two sons here in 1 Samuel 2?

Well, the first marker, the first identifier, and by the way, I'm going to deal with three of them. You can have an individual possess all of these three, some of these three, but if you possess any of these three, can we agree it is not favorable unto one's life and to one's relationship with the Lord? The first one is this, they're lost. Look at verse 12. They're not only sons of Belial, it says "they knew not the LORD." Now these men wore the right clothing, they showed up to the right place at the right time, they went through the rituals, they were what we call religious, but it says "they knew not the LORD." In fact, one of the parallel passages in Matthew 7, Jesus is preaching what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, and as it's coming to a close and after he's discussed just a multitude of issues and concerns and such, he alludes to the fact of that day, he says, "And on that day." He speaks about the doors of heaven being shut. He said, "there will be many outside the door who knock on the door and said, 'Hey, why didn't you let us in?' We did great works in your name. We cast out devils in your name. We prophesied in your name." Now can we all agree that sounds a whole lot like Eli's sons? These were individuals who didn't just "claim" to be religious, they were active, they were present, they were a, shall we say, out in the open. What does Jesus say? "Depart from me, you workers of iniquity. I never knew you." Just because you "stand on a pulpit" doesn't mean you have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Just because you wear the garb, just because you have the title, just because above your door it says, "Pastor So-and-so," does not mean necessarily you know Jesus and one day you will "be in a place the Bible calls heaven." The first problem that they had then and we've gotten now, there are men today who stand up day after day and week after week, they may or may not have a Bible in their hand, and they do not know Jesus. Well, if the pulpit doesn't know Jesus what's going to happen in the pew and what's eventually going to happen in the culture around us?

But then we get to verse 13 and I'll be honest with you, when you read verse 13 through 17, it's a little bit tedious. There aren't you grateful that's not what our worship services look like today? Nonetheless, you may read that and say, "Okay, I don't understand it, but what's the problem with it?" Notice what it says in verse 13, "And the priest's custom." This is important because what you read in these verses is completely at odds with Leviticus 7:31 and 32. You say why is that important? Because when they came to the house of the Lord, there was a certain way the sacrifices were offered, there was a certain way the priests were to respond, and what were these priests doing? What were those that donned the pulpits of their day? They were not only doing it contrary to the word of God, it was causing people to abhor and disdain even "being in the house of the Lord."

Not only are there those then, but today that are what we might say, lost. What we discover here is from a theological perspective, they were liberal. You say, "I know that's a politically charged word." I said theologically. So what is a theological liberal? That is somebody who either as we see here, takes their own agenda, perspective or philosophy

and adds it and makes it either equal to or above the word of God, or they take that which is clearly written in the word of God, and say, "We no longer have to subscribe to it." It is all based on how they respond to the word of God.

Now many years ago, I found myself in a lecture. It was one of those that we had gathered. There were about 150 or more of us in the room. We were there to learn about the New Testament. It sounds like an admirable activity. There was a world-renowned scholar that was to stand before us to articulate to us the deep truths of the New Testament. It's one of those days that I'll never forget. In fact, I know you have those memories where when you take yourself back, you can't only just see what's happened, you can still smell the room, so to speak. It started out okay, but it went sideways real quick. I guess the professor walked in the room, had a Bible in his hand. Lecture hall, about 150 of us, kind of a shotgun look. He went over to the far right wall and he stood there very stately. He leaned against the wall, crossed his legs, opened up his Bible. He made this statement, he said, "There are some people in this world that believe this book is the very word of God. They believe that every phrase, every word, every letter, every punctuation, everything contained between these pages are the word of God. He hasn't had anything to add to it and nothing should be subtracted from it. That is, those that are 'this side of the conversation.'" Then he made his way onto the other side of the lecture hall, and it was a much larger room than where I'm walking. He again very stately put himself against the wall, crossed his legs, opened up the Bible, and he said, "There are some individuals who believe that the words within the pages of this book are nothing more than a good book. That's all it is. It's just a good book." He took one step away from that wall and he said, "This is where your professor stands, let's begin."

Now, ladies and gentlemen, that may not have been a local church, but you know who was sitting in the seats that day? People who are now in the pulpits of our churches. And why do you now wonder you don't have to anymore, why has the nation gone so sideways? Because the pew's gone sideways and the pew's gone sideways because the pulpit no longer believes, "Thus saith the Lord." We take our agendas and our philosophies, and we elevate it above scripture. We take what scripture clearly says and say, "Well, it really doesn't mean that anymore."

That's exactly what these two guys were doing. They decided to make the Bible convenient for them, that which would benefit them, and what did it do? It produced people who were frustrated, disgusted, they abhorred the things of God. And last but not least, look at verse 22. I mean, this is beyond theological liberalism, this is beyond just relationship lostness. Their dad shows up and says, "Guys, why are you doing what you're doing with whom you're doing it with at the church?" I mean, it's bad enough to do other places, but you literally are coming to church and read how it's described there: they are taking advantage of, they are feasting upon their carnal, fleshly desires, and they're using their office, they're using their position, and they're using their authority to do so. Unfortunately for the last several decades, you and I have been subjected to way too many of these scandals. Too many individuals, prominent ministries, if you allow me to say, prominent pulpits who many have had to get up and confess their carnality, they've had to confess their desires to do exactly what verse 22 describes. But in recent days, in

recent years, it's even taken a more dire twist. No longer is it standing up confessing one's sin, it's making excuses and turning those who are victims into much the opposite. We have individuals today who use their pulpit as a means to coerce people to feed their carnal, fleshly desires, and then they justify it.

Guess what folks? The news that we watch every day, it's not new. It was happening in 1 Samuel 2. Here's what's interesting look at verse 24. Listen to what Eli says about this. He says, "No, my sons, for it is no good this report that I have. You make the Lord's people to transgress." What is he saying? He's saying because you're doing what you're doing and because you are who you are, that's exactly how the people are behaving. You see, how goes the pulpit, there goes the pew. How goes the pew, there goes the nation. He says you've caused them to transgress because they see what you're doing, they hear what you're doing and say, "Well, if they can do that, then surely I must be free to do so as well."

So what's the mess that's taken place? Interesting the same mess in 1 Samuel 2 is the same mess that we have today. You may have noticed in chapter 1 and 2 that there's this continual statement that people came to Shiloh once a year to offer a sacrifice. We say that's admirable. Well, it's also very interesting because according to Deuteronomy 16, the men were supposed to show up three times, not just once. Why is it that they're only coming once? Well, because they abhor this, they despise this, there there's no joy in this because they know what's about to happen, they know they're about to face a lost, liberal, lewd individual who's going to take advantage of them and then blame them for the wrong that was done.

It says the people have transgressed. So what did they do then? They quit going. You know what's happening today? The same thing? Let's talk about how this problem has permeated our culture. Let's talk about the propensity that we have today for people to just "leave altogether." Don't get me wrong, I know that unfortunately, the behavior of the pulpit has impacted the behavior of the pew but how has that transgressor, how has that worked out in our culture? I want to introduce you today to a group of people you may or may not be familiar with. They've gotten a lot of press lately, at least in my world and my context. I want to introduce you to the "nones," and I'm not talking little ladies in black and white garments. I'm talking those who say we believe in nothing. It's not that they believe an ulterior or alternative faith, they believe nothing.

So I've got a little graph I want to show you. This is a graph that was published in recent years. I know it's kind of convoluted. I'll kind of work this out, though. This is a graph that compares those that are "nones," those that believe nothing, to those who typically subscribe to some form or aspect of what we know as Christianity. Now understand that when sociologists do these studies, they tend to divide the umbrella of Christianity into Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, mainline Christianity. There's a host of different things and you can see it there on the screen, and so I understand that collectively it's a larger number, but you do understand there's a reason these respective lines on the graph worship where they worship, in the way that they worship, because they believe differently than the other graphs that are there or the other lines. You say, "Well, what's

so critical?" I want you to notice a common thread: those that are identified as some form of "Christian belief," you notice what direction the line is headed? The wrong way. You notice the one line that's headed upwards? The "nones," those that believe nothing. They say, "I've checked out. I am so disappointed. I'm so discouraged. I am so just done with what y'all are preaching and what you claim to be living. I don't want to be a part of anything."

Now go back to the beginning of that graph and you'll notice something: back in the '60s there was only one in five Americans who said they believed nothing. You say, "Well, why is that a significant time period?" I'll tell you why" because the '60s weren't just rebellious at Woodstock, they were rebellious in the pulpit as well because we decided to start, shall we say, petting the fur of the culture rather than saying, "Thus saith the Lord." Today, almost one in three in our culture say, "I don't believe anything." Now here's what I want you to take away from this graph. 1. The fastest growing group of religious identification in our culture today are those who say, "I don't want anything to do with anything. I'm out. I'm done." And here's the frightening part, look at the graph: they're the largest. When you take those panels of Christianity, there is no respective panel that today is larger than those who claim they believe nothing.

Can I tell you the why? Why is this happening? Look back over the last 50-60 years, I'll tell you what happened: we did exactly what the Israelites did in 1 Samuel, we said, "We don't want the judges. Give us the kings." And what happened is the pulpit decided to go beyond scripture, subtract from scripture and the pew decided, "Do you know what? It doesn't matter. There's no distinctiveness anymore, there's no holiness anymore." And in fact, we've become a world today that most people in church would rather be happy than holy because it sells books. Guess what? Remember chapter 8 verse 6 last week? We want to be just like everybody else. It sounded like a good idea 50-60 years ago. Look what it's produced. I'm sure it sounded good to Hophni and Phineas, "Hey man, we're going to get a little extra to eat today. Let's stretch what the Bible says." But they deplored the word of God. They abhorred and they despised even being at the house of God. The same thing's happening today. People have said, "I'm done. I'm checking out." As goes the pulpit, so goes the pew. As goes the pew, so go the people or the nation.

So what's the message? What is that for us to learn today? What do we need to walk away with instead of just experiencing the reality of the hard data and the reality of what we're walking through, what is the message for you and I today? I want you to notice in verse 27 of this chapter, it says that there was a man of God who came to Eli. You say, "Why is it important the way it's written?" We don't have his name. He wasn't on the speaking circuit. He didn't have a bestseller. He wasn't a nationwide televangelist. It just said a man showed up, a man who nobody recognized his name. It says, "there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to offer upon mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? and did I give unto the house of thy father all the offerings made by fire of the children of Israel?" You and I, if there's one thing we need to learn

today, we need to learn from the past. What does he do? He goes back and says, "You remember this incredible event when God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, 400 plus years of indentured servanthood, of bondage? Miraculously, what we know as the famous plagues, walking through what we know as the Red Sea headed toward what we know as the Promised Land?" What does he say he did? "According to his word." I want you to think back to Exodus 12. The final plague, the death of the firstborn has just commenced. The Israelites are gathered, much like many of you were last night, in the dark. Some of you will get that in just a moment. There's a lot of people who spent last night in the dark in our community. They're sitting there in the dark waiting for the Lord's instruction. What did he tell them? "You need to cook your food a certain way. You need to have a certain posture. You need to have shoes on your feet. And when I tell you, don't ask questions, just go." Can you imagine if they said, "Well, you know, I think I want to do it my way tonight." Can I tell you what happened to those who did it their way? They died in Egypt. He said, "I need you to go to this location." "But God, I don't like that location. I like this location." He said, "If you want to get across that sea, you'd better go where I tell you to go." And then when they finally get across, he said, "Hey I need you to go into the Promised Land and I need you to come and tell me what you see." You know what they said? "O God, we can't do it. They're too big. We're not mighty enough." He said, "I didn't ask your opinion, I asked what do you see?"

Every single time when they did it according to the word of God, it always worked out. Then they go into Jericho, one of my favorite stories in the Bible I would have loved. You know those old stories, if you could go back in time and just witness some historical events, I would have loved to go to Jericho. I've seen the ruins. You say, "Why would you want to go?" I want to stand there and watch the expressions on the people's faces when their battle strategy is to march around the city banging pots and pans. I mean, seriously, who's scared of that? Nobody. Why did it work? Because they did according to the Lord according to his word. You and I need to learn that when we do it God's way, no matter what it looks, sounds and/or feels like, it always works out. When we do it our way, it always turns into a giant mess.

The second thing that you're to do beginning in verse 29, he says, "Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me," woo, that's strong, "to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed." We don't only need to learn from history, you and I need to lament our present. It ought to bother you when you watch the news. It ought to bother you when you hear the reports not just of Hophni and Phineas, but unfortunately what we're subjected to almost every single day of our lives. No more should we say, "Oh, that's just the world we live in." No longer do we have the privilege of saying, "Oh, it's just a phase." We're out of the phase, folks. The phase has passed. The curve has yielded. We're there and he says we need to lament, we need to be more concerned with what God thinks than what anybody else posts on social media about whatever it is that you live and what you proclaim. We need to lament. We need to be

heartbroken about the world that is around us and unfortunately, the world oftentimes it's even within the "church."

Last but not least, we need to limit, we need to limit the judgment. If you'll read the rest of this chapter for the sake of time, I'm going to yield to your own time, do you know what he says? "Because you are not changing, because you are not lamenting, because you are not repenting, because you're not doing it my way, guess what, Eli? Those two boys of yours that you love, you loved growing up going to ball games watching, they're going to die and it's going to be ugly. Why? Because they refuse to repent. They refuse to do it my way. Judgment is going to come."

You know, it's interesting all through 1 Samuel we see the "faithfulness of God." I want you to turn to the end of the chapter, verse 35. By the way, let me give you the cart before the horse: the sons of Eli do die as the Lord pronounced in chapter 4. It continues to go sideways. Do you notice what verse 35 says? "And I will raise up a faithful priest." That's Samuel. You know, in the midst of Egypt there was Goshen. In the midst of all the rebellion, there's always a remnant. And in the midst of Hophni and Phineas, there was a young man by the name of Samuel, as we'll see next week, who refused to do it any way but God's way. Death, destruction, and judgment does not have to be how your story is written. It does not have to be how our story is written. May we today learn from 1 Samuel 2 and not do as we often do, just repeat the same mistake over and over and over again.

Let's pray with their heads bowed and our eyes closed. Even though today it was a message that was corporate in nature, not only the people of God back then, but ourselves in this context and maybe today the Spirit of God took the word and said, "I know that was a story about a group of people, but that's your story." Maybe you're that person today who's refused to yield to the Lord, maybe you're that person today who's refused to admit their sin, refused to repent from it and said, "I am determined to do it my way. I don't care what God thinks." I don't think you want your story to end the way that Hophni and Phineas' does. In fact, Romans 6 says the wages of our sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. The good news today, the gospel today is their story doesn't have to be your story because Jesus Christ came, he lived, he died, and he rose, your story can be his story. The Bible says in Romans 10, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe today that's your heart's cry. "God I, just need to be forgiven. I just need to be saved." The great news is you don't have to sign up for a course, you don't have to pass a test, you don't have to jump through a bunch of religious hoops, you don't have to do all the details that we read here in 1 Samuel 2. You've just got to cry out to the Lord, much like Hannah did last week saying, "God, please look favorably upon me." If you're that person today, can I encourage you just to have a heart to heart with the Lord, not necessarily out loud, not necessarily the same words that I or somebody else might use, but maybe your conversation will go a little something like this. "God, today for the first time, I'm going to be honest I've got a sin problem. God, much like these two men in the story, I've been places I should have never been. I've done things I should have never done. I've said things I should have never said and, God, you know I've thought things that should have never crossed my mind, and I believe what

your word says, your word says the result or the wages of my sin is death. But God, your word also says the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So today, I believe, God, I believe Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. He lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when he hung upon that cross as he shed his blood, he was paying the price for my sin, my transgression and my rebellion. God, today I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, Jesus Christ made it possible, he made it feasible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be safe. God, today I don't have all the answers to the struggles and issues and problems of life, but there's one thing I know, that Jesus Christ is the only solution to my sin problem. So God, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. And the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today for the very first time cried out to the Lord. In just a moment, I'm going to pray for us, we're going to stand and sing together. We've got a team set aside, a room set aside, we just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We'd love to hear your story. We'd love to celebrate. We'd love to pray with you and pray for you. But maybe today, maybe you say, "Do you know what, pastor? I'm already saved but I've never followed in believers' baptism." We'd love to have that conversation. You say, "Well, I got that all taken care of but I want to know how do I become a part of this incredible God-fearing congregation?" We'd love to have that conversation. Or maybe today you say, "I just am walking through something and I need somebody to pray with me or pray for me." We would love the privilege.

Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, God, thank you, thank you that in spite of the fact that when we look in the spiritual mirror we see Hophni and Phineas and Eli and others but, God, thank you that you called on them to repent, you called on them to lament and, God, today you've called on us. May we learn from the lessons of the past, may we lament for our present condition and, God, may you through your favor, grant us repentance and a life lived for you rather than judgment. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.