

WHAT GOD SAYS IS WHAT GOD MEANS

14 But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” 15 Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.” 16 “Enough!” Samuel said to Saul. “Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night.” “Tell me,” Saul replied.

17 Samuel said, “Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. 18 And he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.’ 19 Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?”

20 “But I did obey the LORD,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. 21 The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”

22 But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.”

There are several disciplines, you might call them sciences, in understanding the word of God. One of these is hermeneutics or interpretation. Maybe you will remember this name here in New Ulm by thinking of Hermann the German, as he raises what I’ll call his “Sword of ‘Hermeneutics’” over us as we interpret and understand the Scriptures, especially dividing Law and Gospel, but also understanding the basic meaning of the text. This was what King Saul failed to do after the Battle with the Amalekites.

God had commanded Saul to destroy, to completely destroy, the Amalekites. They were a Canaanite nation that were so wicked and so corrupt that their very existence threatened the spiritual future of God’s people. They had attacked the Israelites as they left Egypt, even before they arrived at Mount Sinai. That was the battle when Moses had to keep his arms raised, and so one man and also faithful Aaron were there “holding up the prophet’s hands.” 400 years later, they were still very much a threat. So when Saul went into battle against them, he warned another tribe to get out of the way, and then attacked them all the way from Israel down into the Sinai peninsula and the desert of Shur. He captured their king and put everyone else to death, along with most of their animals, but the best animals he spared. He even planned to sacrifice some of those animals.

But when Samuel the Prophet arrived, he wondered: “If you were supposed to completely destroy them, what’s all this bleating of sheep and mooing of cows?” And Saul acted as if his **hermeneutics**, his **interpretation** of God’s Word was better than that of the Lord’s own prophet

who had spoken that word in the first place. It was as if he was claiming, “Maybe I had a bad text, a bad copy of the Scripture. But won’t I still be ‘completely destroying’ these animals if I sacrifice them? Isn’t that the same as slaughtering them where they stood in the pens and inside the barns in the Amalekite villages?”

Samuel’s answer is a passage we often memorize: “**To obey is better than sacrifice.**” That means, it’s better to do precisely what God says and not put your own spin on it. Don’t try to push the boundaries of God’s law the way that the whole nation tries to push the boundaries of the speed limit, or covid regulations, like teenagers pushing the boundaries of their curfew.

For Saul, the result was the end of his reign as king. God had finished with a king who wouldn’t obey him. It was time to raise up a new king, and just twelve verses after our text, God sends Samuel to the little town of Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, to anoint a new man to be King of Israel. That man’s name—that boy, really—was David.

What God says is what God means.

That’s the lesson we learn from Saul and the Amalekite plunder. Since today ^(this weekend) is also Confirmation day, I would like to apply our lesson to Luther’s Small Catechism, our textbook for confirmation and for the basics of Christian living.

When Luther wrote the Small Catechism, he presented Christian doctrine in six simple parts: The Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Forgiveness of Sins (which we call the Ministry of the Keys in the Catechism), and the two Sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

As we ponder these things, let’s remember the lesson that King Saul failed: What God says in his word, is what God means.

- What are two very important things we learn in the Creed?

Of course, the Apostles’ Creed was not written yet to be part of Scripture. We think it was written shortly after the text of the Bible was completed since Christians were using a form of it already in the second and third centuries. The creed teaches us **Who God is**, taking us through the work of each person of the Holy Trinity, and the creed teaches us **What God has done for us** in the dramatic steps of the Second Article and the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- What are the three basic parts of the Lord’s Prayer?

In the Lord’s Prayer, we have three basic pieces. First, we have three petitions that focus on our relationship with God and our desire to keep his name holy in our lives, for his kingdom to come and for his will to be done in our lives. Then we have three petitions that focus on our fallen relationship with sin, as we ask God to forgive our sins, to not lead us into temptation, and to deliver us from evil. Sandwiched briefly in-between these heavenly and earthly requests is the request for our daily bread, which is us asking God to give us everything we need for both body

and life, whether that's a **spouse, job, home, food, income, health, enough land**, and also **the ability to do what God would have me do in his kingdom**.

- As we turn to the Ten Commandments, we should prepare to answer: What would the world like to do with the Ten Commandments?

This is surely a King Saul question. Just as Saul thought he could tweak God's command to suit himself, and even improve on it just a little bit, the world would surely like to do one of two extremes. The world would love to throw out the commandments altogether, or modify them, modernize them, soften some, or toughen up others. The one thing that man always wants to do with God's Law is change it. But we should remember that when God says, "Don't have any other gods," that's what he means. When he says, "Honor your father and mother, and others in authority," that's what he means. And on and on through the commandments, his Holy Law.

- The Ministry of the Keys give us the power and authority to forgive sins. We do that privately in our lives. We do it publicly in worship through the two sacraments.
- We define a sacrament with the acronym "**WIFE.**" **W** is the Word of God. **I** stands for "Instituted by Christ." **F** is the Forgiveness of sins, and **E** reminds us of the earthly element, water in baptism and bread and wine in communion.
- Regarding baptism, one thing that needs restating these days is that although any Christian can baptize in an emergency, normally we ask the Pastors to perform baptisms because that is what pastors are called to do. We prefer to have our baptisms here in worship if possible so that God's church can witness them and celebrate with the family.
- Finally, the Lord's Supper.

We need the Lord's Supper because sin every day. This is God's solution to our sins in our lives in real time, right now. What does it mean to examine yourself before taking the Lord's Supper? First of all, that means to examine my life and my sinfulness. This is the sin I confess. But then it's also the recognize that Jesus forgives my sin, and that in the sacrament I receive his body and blood. This would be true whether I believe it or not, and those who take the Lord's Supper without believing it take it to their own destruction and judgment. That's why the church has, throughout it's 2,000-year history, practiced a careful fellowship around the Lord's Supper, and why the recent practice, only around for the last 200 years of so-called "Open Communion" is a frightening abomination, inviting people to partake without knowing the danger of doing it without faith in Christ. This is why we teach our young people what they receive in the Lord's Supper, and why today, after two years of instruction—more than 120 hours of instruction in most cases—they are ready to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

When God says a thing, he means it. When he says we are forgiven through the blood of Jesus, that's exactly what God means. This is what we teach. This is what we believe. And we are thrilled once again to pass this along to the next generation as we do year after year. Because we want what has been for our good, to be theirs. Amen.