

“Do Not Turn Away”

What is the best piece of advice you’ve ever been given? We’ve all been given advice from parents or teachers or pastors or friends, or maybe all of them. But is there a bit of advice that has always stuck with you or been especially helpful? Maybe you’ve been told, “Never go to bed angry.” There’s actually a Bible passage that offers similar advice, and that is advice that has helped many couples manage difficult times. Maybe the advice was “Do what you love to do” or “Follow your passion.” And maybe advice like that finally helped you figure out what you wanted to do as a career or convinced you to take a step that you were reluctant to take. Or maybe you’ve figured out how valuable this piece of advice is: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

Our sermon text this morning shares with us some words of advice that Samuel offered to the Israelites. It was an occasion that provided him the perfect opportunity to speak to them and offer that sort of advice. The occasion was his retirement from being a judge over Israel. King Saul had been made their king, and Samuel would be a loyal subject. But as God’s prophet he also had some important words of advice, words that were more than a pious opinion, but were directions from God for the people. And the advice was straightforward: Do not turn away. Do not turn away from the Lord, and do not turn away to idols. His words offer encouragement for us today as well.

To appreciate these words more fully, let’s look closer at the context in which they were spoken. To us today it hardly seems a big deal that the Israelites had gotten a king. But for the Israelites this was a major step. Saul was their first king, and he became king because the people insisted that they needed a king over them. They wanted to be like the other nations around them and to have a king to lead and rule over them. The problem was, they were not like the nations around them. God was their ruler. He had sent prophets and judges to lead and guide his people. When they asked for a king, he warned them that they wouldn’t like what a king would need to do to maintain power. He told the people that their demand for a king was a sinful rejection of God’s rule over them. But the people insisted.

Following a major military victory under Saul, Samuel gathered the people together to reaffirm Saul’s kingship over them. As he spoke, Samuel reminded the people that he had been a fair and honest leader over them. They had insisted on a king in spite of the warnings he had shared. They wanted to be like the other nations. They had done evil in God’s eyes in this way.

The people reacted in humble repentance. They realized that they had done evil. They asked Samuel to pray for them. And Samuel’s reply to them is recorded in the words of our text.

These words sound a strong warning for the people of Israel, a warning against the idols to whom they might turn. History tells us that this was a real temptation for the Israelites. They had failed to carry out God’s command upon entering the Promised Land, his command to get rid of the pagan nations there so that they would not be ensnared. The people who remained around the Israelites worshiped idols, and they worshiped them in ways that enticed the people of Israel. In many cases the Israelites had given in to temptation and chased after idols rather than remaining faithful to God.

But Samuel explained to them why it was so foolish to chase after idols. **“Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.”** Don’t turn away to idols, because idols can’t do anything for you. They have no power. They are creations of human imagination.

That warning is still appropriate for us today. We are surrounded by many world religions. Many people would even suggest to us that all religions are somehow equal and valid. But we know that there is only one God, who created the world and us. All other supposed gods are idols. They are useless and worthless. They can do nothing to save, nothing to help. Don’t turn away.

Of course, the more subtle temptation than that is more likely to trouble us. It is rather easy to see the difference between Christianity and the God of the Bible and a religion like Islam or Mormonism. But it's not always easy for us to see the other idols that are around us. Remember that Luther explained the first commandment by saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Any time we fear or love or trust in something else more than God, it has become an idol for us.

There are many of these "secret" idols that people hold in their hearts. Maybe the temptation is to trust in money. Maybe it is to love power or fame. Even a blessing like our families can become an idol when we love them more than we love God. Or sometimes the idol that tempts us is very specific. It is that American Girl's doll that we just have to have, or the Star Wars toy. Or it's the house we want or the car that we need to drive. It may seem like these are a good idea for us. It may seem like they make a major difference in our lives, but ultimately they are powerless to help in any real, meaningful way.

So don't turn away from God, who has done great things for you. Think of how many examples of God's goodness the Israelites had witnessed. They were living in the Promised Land. They had heard the accounts of how God had rescued their forefathers from slavery in Egypt in order to bring them to this land, how he had sent plagues and had separated the waters of the sea in order to accomplish this. In the Promised Land they had all that they needed to thrive, all as a blessing from the hand of God.

And they had another promise. They had God's promise that through this people, he would send the world's Savior. He had singled them out from all the nations to become the fulfillment of his promise to Adam and Eve. And through faith in that Savior, their sins, too, were washed away. They saw repeated evidence and reminders of this in their worship at the tabernacle and as they brought their offerings to the priests. They heard the gracious words of prophets like Samuel pointing them to these amazing promises.

On that basis, in spite of the sinfulness of the people, Samuel could assure them of forgiveness. **"Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord."** In fact, Samuel reminded them, **"the Lord was pleased to make you his own."** The people could continue to depend on God for forgiveness and for all that they needed in this life.

So can we. Situations have changed in many ways. We don't live in a Promised Land or among a nationality singled out to be God's people. We haven't seen firsthand or heard the reports in the same way that the Israelites did of God's wonders among them, but we have seen them through the records of Scripture. And even though the situation has changed, many things are precisely the same. We have seen God's goodness to us in providing what we need for our lives, in enabling us to work and support ourselves. In fact, he has abundantly blessed us. And more than anything, we have seen how he carried out his promise of a Savior. He sent Jesus to live and to die as our substitute. He sends his Holy Spirit to us in Baptism and in his Holy Word to turn our hearts to him. He strengthens us through that same Word and through the Lord's Supper. He has made us his very own forgiven people. As Samuel encouraged, **"consider what great things he has done for you."**

Why would any of us even consider turning away from that? Instead, as we have noted in this worship service, our lives are to be lives of thanksgiving and service. Samuel told the Israelites, **"But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart."** We show our thankfulness to God in the same way, by looking to his Word to direct our lives. In that way we are like the leper who saw that he was healed and returned to thank Jesus. God's goodness to us deserves our thanks and praise, our loving service.

No doubt you have heard many pieces of advice, some of which may have been extremely valuable. But this advice is advice that has an eternal impact. Consider the great things the Lord has done for you. Don't turn away to anything else, but serve him in thankfulness.

The Text: 1 Samuel 12:20–24 (NIV84)

²⁰ “Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. ²¹ Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. ²² For the sake of his great name the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. ²³ As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. ²⁴ But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.