Sermon Series: The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity
Sermon Title: You Stop Making Excuses for Your Failures.

Text: **1 Samuel 15:10-24 -- The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. 12 And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." 13 And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord." 14 And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" 15 Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak." 17 And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. 18 And the Lord sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction 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 pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" 20 And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal." 22 And 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 listen than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king." 24 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.**

Excuses only satisfy the people who make them. Take these excuses offered to two traffic cops. (**1**) **Officer Darwin Justice pulled over** a 17-year-old kid on I-71 just south of Grove City, Ohio. He was driving a gold Ford Explorer and was clocked at 101 mph. When the officer told him the speed he was traveling, the young man threw a fit and wanted to argue with him, claiming that he was only doing 85 MPH. Officer Darwin, being the curious cop, asked him why he thought he was only going 85. He responded, "***My speedometer only goes to 85 and I had my gas pushed to the floor***." (**2**) **Officer Matt Mues shares this story**. One of my cop friends pulled over a couple for speeding and asked why the driver, a male, was going so fast. The man said his wife was pregnant and they were going to the hospital. The officer said that was fine -- even though he was pretty certain the man was lying -- and followed them to the hospital just to "make sure everything went alright." When they got to the hospital, he escorted them in and made sure they got a room right away. Once they were in the room, the male admitted to lying. The officer didn't write him up. He figured the hospital bill would be enough.

This morning, I want to continue to look with you at <u>another evidence of maturity in the life of a believer</u>. In case you weren't here last week, the first sign we mentioned was the ability to exercise freedom responsibly. In this message, I want to argue that a spiritually mature person ***stops making excuses for his or her failures***. Now, before we go on, I feel like I need to explain to you the way in which I'm using the word "***failure***" in this message. Everyone understands that there are times in life when we attempt some goal only to come up short in reaching it, but that's not what I have in mind here. I'm using the word not so much to describe an unreached goal, but "***a false step—as in a moral trespass***." That's how it is used in **2 Peter 3:17** (**You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of**

lawless people and lose your own stability). **It means to be driven out of one's course. That's what moral failure does. It sidetracks us so that we are no longer faithful to the Lord**.

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How does this apply to our topic? Well, even after coming to faith in Christ, we have all, **mature and immature believers alike**, had the experience of giving in to temptation and allowing our fleshly nature to get the best of us. **Yet I have noticed that some Christians tend to handle their missteps very differently. Those who are pressing on to maturity do not offer excuses for their sinful behavior**. They have discovered a better way of dealing with it. On the other hand, those who have never grown beyond infancy take an entirely different approach to their moral lapses. A perfect example of this is found in our text today. **I invite you to take a look at a character who was a master at coming up with excuses for his sinful deeds…the first monarch of Israel…King Saul.**

The Israelites rejected Samuel as their leader and God as their king (**See 1 Samuel 8:4-7**). They wanted to be just like the other nations with a leader they could follow into battle, so God gave them their first human monarch. He was a physically impressive man of whom Samuel said, "***There is no one like him among all the people***." Of the tribe of Benjamin, of the family of Kish, his name was Saul. Though somewhat reluctant to reign at the beginning, when the Spirit of God came upon him, Saul proved to be an effective leader who delivered Israel from her enemies. He was a young man when he became king. ***Saul reigned for forty years*** (**See Acts 13:21**—*note—some of the Hebrew in* **1 Samuel 13:1** *is missing so that it is very unclear what is being said*). At one point, during his kingship, God decided to use Saul and his army to punish a people known as the **Amalekites**. This is where we pick up his story in **1 Samuel 15:1** and look at the moral failure of Saul, the excuses he provided, and the reason for his failure.

How did Saul fail? In the first **eleven verses of 1 Samuel 15**, Samuel announced to Saul that the time had come for God's judgment concerning the Amalekites to come true. **Why did God deal so harshly with them? They had attached Israel shortly after the exodus from Egypt and could easily have discouraged the Israelites so that they might have wanted to go back to being slaves** -- **See Exodus 17:8-16**. So, Saul was told to take his armies, attack the Amalekites and utterly destroy them. ***No person or animal was to be left alive***. With about **two hundred and ten thousand soldiers under his command**, Saul went to the city of Amalek and prepared to ambush its inhabitants. Prior to the attack, Saul warned some **Kenites** to leave the city because they, unlike the Amalekites, had been **consistently friendly with Israel**. Then Saul and his army carried out the word of the Lord for the most part. They killed everyone **except the king of the Amalekites, Agag**, and everything **except the best of the sheep, cattle, fat calves and lambs**. These were not left alive because the Israelites were unclear about God's command or unable to carry it out, but because they were unwilling to obey just like Israel was unwilling to obey God's command and take the Promised Land—**See Deuteronomy 1:26**.

God's response to Saul's disobedience is found in **verses ten and eleven**: "**Then the Word of the Lord came to Samuel** (*The word of the Lord was rare in those days (**See 1 Samuel 3:1**). This phrase is only used three times in 1 and 2 Samuel, and always in relation to a prophet—Samuel, Nathan and Gad*): **I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.** Now, of course, *to fail to carry out God's instructions is to act wickedly*—**Psalm 50:16-17 -- But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?**
For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you." This obviously had a great impact on Samuel, too, as he was troubled and cried out to the Lord all that night.

What did Saul do when he failed? He employed a three-fold strategy to cover up his moral failure.

- **First, he lied about it.** (**See 1 Samuel 15:13-14**). "**I have performed the Lord's commands**," were the very words out of Saul's mouth after meeting up with Samuel in Gilgal. Perhaps he thought it was only a little lie because what he said was mostly true. If that was the case, it would seem that Saul was not that different from a lot of people, including Christians, who are okay with speaking little white lies ***that benefit the one telling it without seemingly harming others***. God, however, doesn't feel the same way about it (**Psalm 101:7 -- No one who practices deceit shall dwell in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes**). **Tony Evans** warns that ***a little lie is like being a little pregnant…it'll all show up eventually***. In Saul's case, this happened sooner rather than later when Samuel pointed out that he could hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle nearby.

- **Then, he blamed his men.** (**See 1 Samuel 15:15a**). When confronted with his lie, Saul elected a different strategy, which amounted to shifting the blame to his soldiers for sparing the best of the sheep and the cattle. "**They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction."** Unwilling to own up to his failure, King Saul turned on those who followed him into battle, something that as their leader, he knew he never should have done. Have you ever noticed how quickly some people, when confronted with their own failure, will seek to pin the blame on others?

  In ***Discipleship Journal***, **Don McCullough** relates a story that **John Killinger** tells about ***the manager of a minor league baseball team*** who was so disgusted with his center fielder's performance that he ordered him to the dugout and assumed the position himself. The first ball that came into center field took a bad hop and hit the manager in the mouth. The next one was a high fly ball, which he lost in the glare of the sun--until it bounced off his forehead. The third was a hard-line drive that he charged with outstretched arms; unfortunately, it flew between his hands and smacked his eye. Furious, he ran back to the dugout, grabbed the center fielder by the uniform, and shouted. ***'You idiot! You've got center field so messed up that even I can't do a thing with it***!'

- **Last, he attempted to justify himself.** (**See 1 Samuel 15:15b**). It is likely that even as Saul sought to pin the blame on his soldiers, he already knew that, as their king, he still was ultimately responsible for them. Bearing this thought in mind, then, he attempted to justify his actions by declaring that they only kept the best of the sheep and cattle so that the animals could be sacrificed to God. Those that were not of the highest quality were completely destroyed. It was as if Saul was saying, "***We only did this for you, Lord, so that we could offer you the best of the flock as sacrifices.***" Not only was this a blatant attempt to absolve himself of any blame, but it might have been Saul's intent to put some of it on God, who demanded sacrifices without defect -- **Leviticus 1:2-3 – Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. 3 "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord**.

Why did Saul fail? In **1 Samuel 15:16-24** **we have the answer.** Samuel had had enough of Saul's excuses. "**Stop**!" he said. Then he reviewed the original mission and confronted the king on his lack of obedience. "**Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?"** **Saul knew he was in trouble. That's why he said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal." And that's when Samuel reminded the king that God did not delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, but in obeying his voice**. Why? Because obedience is the measure of one's commitment to God. **Anyone can perform religious rituals, but when these things are done absent of a heart dedicated to following the commands of God, it is**

worthless religion. Saul's sin was nothing short of ***an arrogant act of rebellion*** against God and equivalent to **divination and idolatry**. **Because he rejected the word of the Lord** (*the reason for which we're told* **verse 24***…he was afraid of the people*) **and did not obey God, Saul was rejected as king. Had he FEARED GOD more than he FEARED MAN, Saul could have continued serving the Israelites as their leader**.

This side of heaven, no believer is immune to a false step/moral failure every now and then. The issue isn't so much IF it's going to happen, but HOW we'll deal with this kind of failure when it does happen. Rather than lie, cast blame on others or attempt to justify our behaviors as Saul did, let me suggest a different path that leads back to a dependent relationship with our Lord.

- **Acknowledge Your Moral Failures** – Don't offer excuses and don't blame others. Listen when God speaks and admit that you have stumbled in your walk with Him by stepping outside of His will for your life (**Jeremiah 3:12-13 -- 'Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord; I will not be angry forever. 13 Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God**).
- **Confess Your Moral Failures** – Once you've admitted failure to yourself, confess it to God and to members of His family so you might be healed (**1 John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness; James 5:16 – Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another**).
- **Address Your Moral Failures** – Saul was in this position because he never learned from his first failure when he offered sacrifices to God in Samuel's place because the prophet had delayed in coming to him while the Philistines were mustering to fight Israel (**See 1 Samuel 13:5-14**). It is not enough to simply acknowledge moral failure. We must examine ourselves and make changes. ***Those who do not learn from the past are destined to repeat it***!

The question for Christians is never IF we're going to stumble into sin, but what we're going to do about it WHEN we do? Here's one way to look at it. In this computer age, we have all found ourselves stuck and trying to troubleshoot a problem on our computers, smartphones, or other electronic devices. **According to multiple studies, one of the biggest time-wasters in the workplace are computer-related malfunctions. One study found that the average person spends 22-25 minutes a day trying to fix a computer-related issue. The estimated cost to larger companies in the US is somewhere in the ballpark of $4000.00 a minute**. One easy solution for many of these issues could be as simple as turning off your device and turning it back on again. Over half of the computer problems technicians deal with can be fixed with a simple reboot. The reason that computers often fail is that they have system processes continually running behind the scenes. These processes leave behind an electronic footprint that takes up memory (RAM**). When you turn off a computer or smartphone, these programs and processes end, allowing you to start on a clean slate with a faster and more efficient working device**. **That's not a bad picture of confession and repentance. We turn from our sin back to God, bring our offenses to Him, seek His forgiveness, and, because He's faithful and just, we are forgiven. IT'S KIND OF LIKE A SPIRITUAL REBOOT, only this one is guaranteed to work because God can't be unfaithful or unjust. Thank God that He chooses to remember our sins no more against us.**