

“A Cut Above The Rest!”

1st Samuel 3:1-20

Dear Brothers and Sisters in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

I want to share this illustration from *Bible.org*, written by an unknown source. They wrote,

“Arabian horses go through rigorous training in the deserts of the Middle East. The trainers require absolute obedience from the horses and test them to see if they are completely trained. The final test is almost beyond the endurance of any living thing. The trainers force the horses to do without water for many days. Then he turns them loose, and of course, they start running toward the water, but just as they get to the edge, ready to plunge in and drink, the trainer blows his whistle. The horses who have been completely trained and who have learned perfect obedience stop. They turn around and come pacing back to the trainer. They stand there quivering, wanting water, but they wait in perfect obedience. When the trainer is sure that he has their obedience, he gives them a signal to go back to drink. Now, this may be severe, but when you are on the trackless desert of Arabia, and your life is entrusted to a horse, you had better have a trained, obedient horse. We must accept God’s training and obey Him.”

When I first read this illustration, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something seemed a bit off about it. I did confirm that what is described is indeed a method used for training Arabian horses. In researching it further, I found a video that demonstrated the horse training method rather well. The video's description said, “A parable of obedience and valor. What often is expected of men by God may seem difficult. Sacrifice, obedience, and other things taught in this story ought to awaken men to their duty to become the Lord's ‘True Arabian’ horses, as it were. Select. A cut above the rest!”

I. Obedience and Willingness

After reading that description, my issue with this illustration finally came to light. Where is the work of Christ? What’s crucially missing is that obedience and willingness to listen to God are not found in grandiose methods of obedience. Obedience and willingness to listen to God come through faith alone. They are a fruit of faith. As Christians, we are not like the Arabian horses trained to stop when the whistle blows. Instead, we stop before the water because the love of Christ has touched our lives. Christ loves us with everlasting love in the forgiveness of sins. Because of that, we love him in return for giving everything up for us. The trainer (our Lord) knows our sinful nature and does not seek programmed or forced obedience. If He wanted that, the fall of man wouldn’t have even been a possibility. The Lord would have created His obedient robots, and we would be on our way. Perfect obedience, instead, is found in Him! Even as we grow in the faith, the Lord knows our thirst for disobedience. He knows that it will grow and that we will be powerfully drawn to the water to drink when we should not. He is sure that though we know of His grace and mercy, we will always be enticed to abuse it.

God is not like the Arabian horse's master. He does not test and train in the same way that a human might train an animal. He tests, trains, and teaches us in the context of belief in Jesus and His love for us in the forgiveness of sins. He speaks in grace, and we listen. He trains us as He brings to light the fact written in Romans 5:8 that “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Unfortunately, we often do not behave as “A cut above the rest!” And unfortunately, we as Christian people neglect that which has been given to us in the Word and sacraments. We tend to run toward our sin rather than listen to our master.

And so, we come to the conversion and calling of Samuel, a man who would go on to be a prophet in a time when the Word of the Lord was hard to find. Sound familiar? Our culture today of acceptance of crude disobedience to the Lord, of running to the water regardless of any whistle, which is now spanning across the world and “unifying” with the unbelieving world, has brought about a famine of God’s word. But have you ever noticed that it is everywhere and nowhere simultaneously? The Word of the Lord is everywhere today. In three seconds, we can have the entirety of any translation of the Bible or any commentary on the Bible in the palm of our hands through a Bible app on the internet or simply the fact that Bibles are everywhere as the highest-selling book of all time. And yet, no one likes to talk about the Word because it is contrary to everything that the sinful flesh wants. This unbelieving world is in a drought. As Amos 8:11-12 predicted, “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”

As we look around to see the utter rejection of everything we believe, we can see more from the perspective of young Samuel as it applies to our time. As our text describes, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” Why so much silence then and now? This silence is a picture of God’s judgment, and this was indeed a time when the Israelites were under judgment. They had failed to honor Yahweh and turned to the gods of the Canaanite peoples. They wanted to be more like the other nations with a worldly king instead of the King of Kings. They were drinking forbidden water. And so, the Lord turned them over to themselves. The world you see around us today is also under God’s judgment as things continue to grow worse in the unbelieving world where crime runs rampant and the just are called unjust and the guilty not guilty. We look around to see our younger and older generations corrupted by whatever they can get their hands on next to feel good rather than to face the world as it is: sinful, corrupted, unjust, full of idolatry, wicked, and destined to be destroyed.

II. Love That Changes Us

But here, amid the judgment of God, then and now, a remnant is preserved. Samuel was a part of that special elect of God’s chosen people. Our text for today shows him as a young boy who comes to faith and grows in that faith. The Lord cut through it all and opened Samuel’s ears. He was able to reach him so that he desired to hear the Lord. As we see the extraordinary witness of Samuel, we have to ask ourselves, how often are we listening? And I don’t mean listening as in hoping to hear something literally like the Charismatics. But how often are we so stuck in our earthly lives that we do not consider the bigger picture of Christ and His work in and through us?

We get so caught up in our daily lives – in the race to drink that which we are not supposed to drink - that it's easy to see the availability of the Word of God around us as a convenience rather than a necessity. We are so incredibly blessed, and often, we don't think about the fact that the early Christian church was most fortunate to get its hands on just one of the Gospel books for a period of time. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. Even a small amount of reading and meditation on the Word of God can make an incredible impact on our day-to-day lives, more so than staring at a TV screen, getting lost in the news, or running through miles of useless content on Facebook or Instagram. And if it isn't those things, it's something else. It could be getting lost in hobbies, focusing too much on drama and gossip, or getting caught up in pet sins and disobedience. The Lord can cut through it all, but if we do not use the means of grace, then we will run to the water and drink when we shouldn't.

In light of that, I'd like to share a story from *Today in the Word*, published in 1991. "A businessman well known for his ruthlessness once announced to writer Mark Twain, 'Before I die, I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top.' 'I have a better idea,' replied Twain. 'You could stay in Boston and keep them.'" Mark Twain had exposed the hypocrisy of the businessman. The Lord looks at the motivations of the heart. It is not enough to obey; the Lord wants us to obey because of our loving relationship with him. He also wants us to love one another. But this can only come from the gospel of Christ. Climbing the mountain of Sinai and saying the commandments isn't going to cut it.

We are justified by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ and not by observing the commandments. As Galatians 2:16 says, "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law, no one will be justified." You see, our loving and merciful God wishes to see His love perfected in us by the work of the Spirit. It is not some horrid form of legalism where the whistle blows, and since we are trained to stop, we stop. We stop because the Holy Spirit has brought us to see our sin and the love of our Savior. That kind of love changes who we are. Through faith in Christ, the Spirit has filled hearts. Our hearts were empty of Him before as a result of sin. The Lord says in Ezekiel 36:27. "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This is done in us through the cross and empty tomb. He puts his Spirit in us through the means of grace and changes who we are and what we do. He creates in us the fruits of faith.

III. Moving Beyond The Whistle

When we know and believe in Christ's redeeming work for us, we are motivated by His love to bear fruits in keeping with faith. This faith comes and remains in us through the means of grace. In the means of grace, the love of God in Christ keeps working in us so that we grow as obedient horses. We do what we do not because of a whistle but because of the master who loves us. We move beyond the whistle and go to Him, trusting that He loves us even in the moments when it seems that He is keeping us from what we need the most. We are incapable of being an obedient horse, but in His love, we love. And when our master leads us to water, our

drinking and not drinking flows from His deep and abiding care for us at the cross. And so, what do we do? Christ must do it, and He does it by bringing us to him so that His obedience becomes ours, His teaching becomes ours, His witness becomes our witness, His baptism cleanses us so that we may be clean, and what He has done is what we do. We truly do His commandments by faith because He has done them all for us.

As we consider obedience, Samuel serves as a good example. Eli taught him to humbly say, "Speak, for your servant listens," the Lord worked mightily with that, so Samuel was changed and made into a powerful servant. As verse 19 says, "Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." He grew to be a great prophet. A prophet who would usher in a new era from the time of the last judges into the time of the first kings. It was the Lord who made him "A cut above the rest!"

For us, the days of the Lord speaking new revelation to us have ended. The days of direct prophecy, such as what Samuel received, have served their purpose. So, if not an immediate hearing, what are we to be listening to?

We are to be engulfed in God's written and spoken word, recorded for us by the Holy Spirit. God, through the Holy Spirit, used human authors to write what He revealed in the books of the Bible. They were not mere copyists or transcribers. The Holy Spirit guided the writers of Scripture, who used their own vocabularies and styles but wrote only what the Holy Spirit intended. We are to read, hear, trust, and abide by this Word that teaches us of the promise of the forgiveness of sins paid for by Christ. As this promise strengthens us, we begin to live a life according to that forgiveness as the Law is our guide to becoming "A cut above the rest!" We accept God's training in this life, whether an easy or a difficult road, to become His true Arabian horses who find our obedience to only result from the gifts God has given us in Christ—faithful horses who thirst to be with Him.

Amen.