

PLAYING THE FOOL

I Samuel 26:21

"Then said Saul, I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly." I Samuel 26:21.

This text is a very frank confession of King Saul. It arouses our interest to an unusual degree when we are reminded that it was his autobiography. And the fact that this role was self-chosen deepens the pathos of this confession all the more. He was not sent into the world to play the part of a fool. It was intended that he should play the part of a king, but he chose the role of a fool. It is interesting to study the language of his confession: "I have sinned;" "I have played the fool;" "I have erred exceedingly." A more literal translation of the Hebrew would be: "I have missed the mark;" "I have played the fool;" "I have gone far astray."

One mark of the fool is that he pays too dear for what he gets. To pay too dear for anything is one of the abiding marks of folly, and that is where every sinner plays the fool—he pays a thousandfold too dear for what he gets. For the satisfaction of an hour he pays with a dulled intellect, a corrupted body, or a blighted life.

Sin promises liberty, and it gives slavery. It promises comradeship, and it brings solitude. It promises satisfaction and relief, but it ends in an empty heart and inward bitterness. Sooner or later every person who sins has to admit with Saul, "I have played the fool."

Another characteristic of the fool is that he forgets the things that really matter. One sees that in even the cleverest of criminals. A man commits a crime, and with infinite pains he attempts to hide every trace of it. But one thing he forgets, and that leads to his detection. And then that man, in the solitude of prison life, whether he be penitent or not, says to himself in bitterness of soul, "I've played the fool." That is exactly what every sinner does. He forgets the very things that matter. He forgets the power of conscience and the reality of God.

Saul is one of the most striking and tragic figures in the Old Testament. He is the greatest failure of all the kings of Israel. His life is an effective illustration of the progressiveness of sin. If we are at all sensitive as to the supreme values and vital issues of human life, the story of his life is bound to challenge us.

In some ways Saul is very big, and in others very little. In some ways he is commandingly handsome, and others decidedly ugly. All in one he is a giant and a dwarf, a hero and a renegade, a king and a slave, a man God anointed and one whom Satan possessed. He began so promisingly, yet deteriorated so dismally, and ended so ignominiously as to make the downgrade process which ruined him monumental ever afterward to all who will read and learn.

When we first meet Saul there are many things about him to admire. Never did a young fellow show fairer promise or kinglier possibilities; and never did such a young man find more illustrious opportunities greeting him at the outset of his career.

Saul was exceptionally attractive. He had a splendid physique. The record tells us that he was "a choice young man, and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he: from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people." I Samuel 9:2. He was very handsome, tall in stature, graceful in build, princely in bearing, and kingly in appearance. What an advantage is a fine physique. No man of diminutive proportions will pretend that he does not wish he had the congenial benefits of health and height and handsomeness. Saul had these to the degree of striking superiority. He was the most handsomely proportioned young man in the land. By this means he had the initial advantage of being immediately prepossessing. His majestic and impressive appearance commanded the admiration and respect of a nation that was fond of pomp and grandeur.

Saul was very fortunate in the equipment which he received from God. Many a young man has had outstanding opportunity but has lacked ability; and many another has had outstanding ability but has lacked opportunity. Here, however, in the case of young Saul, transcendent opportunity and outstanding ability matched each other. He was called to rule the most wonderful nation in history. His possibilities were immense, and the gifted young man began well.

How did Saul play the fool?

I. By Becoming Conceited.

In his early manhood Saul was genuinely humble. When his father told him to take a servant and go in search of his animals which had wandered from their pasture and were lost, he obeyed cheerfully. He was not too big to work faithfully at such a lowly task. Without asking a question or raising an objection, he simply did as his father told him.

When Samuel told Saul that he was to be the king of Israel, he replied with becoming modesty: "Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me?" I Samuel 9:21.

When the people assembled at Mizpeh for the public election of their king, they cast lots and Saul was chosen. While the voting proceeded, Saul fled in the opinion that he was not qualified for the position. After his election they dragged him from among the baggage, where he had modestly concealed himself, and acclaimed him king. Following words of counsel from Samuel, king though he was, Saul returned home and resumed his work on his father's farm.

With the passing of time Saul became proud of himself. He came to think that because he was the tallest man in all the country that he must be the kingliest of all his fellows. His biography reveals that conceit had a very prominent place among his shortcomings. Conceit has ruined many a promising life. When one thinks too much of himself, he has already found the doorway to the paradise of fools.

Saul became so conceited that he could not bear to hear the people sing the praises of David. After all, a good test of any man is his attitude toward others, and especially is it revealed when others are praised in his presence. He was also conceited in his own shrewdness. He thought himself to be a great deceiver. He lied to David, attempted to cheat Samuel, and even tried to deceive God. Saul, like many others, did not believe that "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." Proverbs 16:18.

Saul illustrates to us that to let "self" get the upper hand in life is to miss the best and to court the worst. It is to end by saying, "I have played the fool." Yet he allowed himself to become self-conscious, self-preferring, self-asserting and self-destroying. Oh, this subtle, insidious "self," this wretched, hereditary legacy from Adam! How it enjoys being noticed! How it pretends! How it deceives! And how it always ruins us when it gets the upper hand! Saul's worst enemy was himself, and that is true of countless others. And the bigger he grew in his own eyes, the smaller he actually became. When he opened the door to pride and pretense, he sold himself to Satan and disaster.

II. By Disregarding God's Commands.

God commanded Saul to destroy completely the Amalekites--men, women, children, flocks and herds. Saul executed the order with dispatch and efficiency, except he took the king, Agag, captive, and retained the best of the flocks of livestock as booty. In

other words, Saul obeyed God only in so far as it suited his whim to do so. Through all these centuries that has been man's trouble. Man has thought that he has known better than God, therefore, he has been unwilling to obey God's commands. But, it never pays to disregard God's commands. Saul discovered that the way of the transgressor is hard.

Saul not only disobeyed God, but he also practiced deception with a view to covering up his guilt. When he kept the best sheep and oxen in violation of God's definite command, Samuel returned and inquired whether or not he had destroyed all. Saul replied that he had, whereupon God set the sheep and the oxen on the witness stand just at that point. Then Samuel asked, "What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" Then, Saul tried to justify his disobedience by putting the blame upon those over whom he exercised authority. After his disobedience, lying and deceit were exposed, Saul reasoned that if his action was wrong the motive was excellent as they meant to sacrifice the best unto the Lord. However, his plea of a good intention was both frivolous and false. Samuel said, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."

Saul preaches to us the one vital condition for the true fulfillment of life is obedience to the will of God; and by obedience we mean loyalty to the word and will of God both in inward motive and in outward action.

III. By Ignoring His Best Friends.

Saul suffered an irreparable loss by making choices that disposed of Samuel, his spiritual teacher. It is a sad day for any man when he separates himself from all spiritual instruction. Samuel was Saul's best friend. And Samuel loved Saul with patient devotion. When Saul went wrong, the prophet did all that human power could do to win him from the error of his way. In fact, there was no better man in all the land than Samuel. Unwilling to be untrue to God, Samuel could not go farther with Saul. "And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death." I Samuel 15:35.

IV. By Leaving God Out Of His Life.

What a different life Saul's would have been if he had only repented of his sin and lived in accordance with the will of God! He stands at the head of the list of self-made fools. Men always play the fool when they make material things their God, when they make a mockery of sin, and when they neglect or reject the Saviour. Saul sinned, but he refused to face his sin, to confess it, to repent of it, and to forsake it.

Many have lived and died in their lost condition because they preferred self-will to God's will; they lived for themselves; they absolutely ignored God. They missed the real meaning and purpose of life; they lived and died alienated from God; and their unavailing confession is, "I have played the fool."

Anybody certainly plays the fool if he becomes conceited, disregards God's commands, ignores his best friends, or leaves God out of his life. Don't play the part of a fool!