

INTRODUCE

Well, good morning church! If I haven't met you yet, my name is Chris Martin, and I'm the Lead Pastor here.

If you've got your Bibles, and I hope you do, please open them up to 1 Samuel chapter 7. 1 Samuel 7. That's where we're going to be.

We want every person to have a hand on their Bible. You can open your phone or tablet to 1 Samuel 7.

INTRODUCTION: ONLINE SHOPPING

In the day and age of online shopping there are two vitally important things for you to know if you want to be a successful online shopper... there's a Junior Varsity move and a Varsity move. Ok?

The JV online shopper looks for these two words:

- FREE SHIPPING!
- If I'm going to buy this thing,
- are they gonna tag another ten bucks on the total?
- So, the FREE SHIPPING is a must have!

But there is a varsity move that I want to commend to you,

- and this one might take a little more work and research,
- because you might have to click on the customer service link...
- but the varsity move is this: do they offer FREE RETURNS?

Cause it does you no good to get free shipping on a new pair of pants...

- only to try them on...
- realize you look a fool...
- and have to pay ten bucks to return them.

FREE RETURNS

I'm calling this sermon today: **SLIDE FREE RETURNS**. And I'm not talking about shopping, but I am talking about what it takes to return to God. What's God's return policy?

And I feel like this is something that many of us can relate to. Do you ever find yourself asking:

"Why is it that I go up and down so much spiritually?"

- A lot of us think of ourselves as kinda spiritually bi-polar...
 - We're not even sure if that's an actual condition,
 - but if it is, we have it.
- One week you're a super-Christian,
- the next week you're not even sure you believe.

It'd be good to know God's return policy for US, WHEN we WANDER!

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ILLUSTRATION: CAMP

And just so you know, I have a PhD in this stuff...you know why?

- It's called youth camp.
- Anyone ever go to youth camp?

So, for me, camp was that same thing every year.

- we would all show up and the band would play...
- and the guy would preach...
- and we only had about 3 hours of sleep for the whole week,
- and then they'd hop you up on pixie sticks and Mountain Dew,
- so, you'd dedicate your life to a Christmas Tree if they asked!

But I'd do it every single year.

- Through tears and snot and hugs and promises,
- I would say, *"God, I am never going to be the same again!"*

And I would do everything they asked me to do.

- I wrote my sins down.
- I nailed them to a cross.
- I burned them in a can.
- I threw them in a river.
- I baked them in a cake.
- Man, whatever it took, I was in.

And I would say, *"God, when I get home...*

- *I'm gonna break up with her,*
- *I'm gonna respect them,*
- *and I'm gonna quit doing...*
 - *well, just about everything I had been doing before camp.*

And I'm telling you, right after camp I would have several successful weeks.

- But in just a matter of weeks,
 - or sometimes days,
- I was back in the same old mess.

What is God's return policy?

How do we get back to him in a real way?

CONTEXT

This is where Israel is at in 1 Samuel chapter 7. Look at verse 2, it says that **all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord**. Why?

- Well, it has become obvious
- that Israel is not walking in the ways of God,
- and that God is judging them.

Remember the state of affairs in Israel at this time.

- Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
- The priesthood is corrupted and being judged.
- The elders of Israel are trying to manipulate God,
 - and they are judged.
- The ark is captured,
 - but even upon its seemingly miraculous return to Israel,
 - the people misuse it,
 - and God judges them by striking down 70 men.

It is clear that Israel is not in sync with the Lord right now,

- and now we're 20 years later,
- and all the house of Israel is lamenting,
- They are feeling deeply their disconnect with God.

And the question is, does God offer FREE RETURNS?

TRANSITION

So, our text today really begins in verse 3, where Samuel, shows up again.

- We haven't seen him since chapter 3,
- And in the midst of the mess that Israel is in...
- God has grown his new leader.

So, you have a people

- who are feeling deep sorrow and remorse...
- and you have a new, godly leader...
- but how do you make sure that this feeling
 - isn't like a quick youth camp experience?
- How do you add some substance to this feeling?

Because we often have feelings of sadness, or regret, or lament over our disconnect from God...

- but how do we return?

Well, I see three things that Samuel does in this narrative to ensure that Israel's lament doesn't wain...but that it remains.

And we see Samuel's first piece of advice in verses 3-4

1 SAMUEL 7:3-4

[3] And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." [4] So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

POINT 1: REPENT

The first thing Samuel calls Israel to do in light of their remorse is to

SLIDE REPENT.

You see, just because someone has emotional sorrow or remorse...that doesn't necessarily mean that they are repentant.

John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:8 that we are to **BEAR FRUIT in keeping with repentance.**

- You can be very sad...
- very remorseful....
- and not be repentant.

So, Samuel says in verse 3:

- **"If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then...**
 - and he gives an action.
- **Put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you.**

You see, they are being called **to BEAR FRUIT in keeping with repentance.**

- How do you know if you are not merely remorseful,
- but rather, repentant?
- **Are you speaking words of repentance...AND**
- **are you evidencing actions of repentance?**

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EXPLAIN: CONTEXT

So, the idolatry that Israel is participating in is sexual in nature. You see mention of the Ashtaroth. So, in the culture surrounding Israel:

- in order to get fertility for your spouse,
- or for your herds,
- or for your crops,
- you had to worship these gods.

And part of the worship experience

- was to have sex with the prostitutes in the temples,
- which essentially “reminded” the gods to bless you with fertility.

My guess is there weren't a lot of Canaanites who said,

- “I'm not getting a lot out of going to church.”
- “Church is boring.”
- “I only go every once-in-a-while.”

But you see, this call to put away these gods would have been incredibly difficult because it was now intermeshed with lust and sex and sin.

APPLICATION

Listen to me church: **remorse is easy...but repentance is hard.**

If you're honest with yourself, is there evidence that you are repentant?
Or do you merely feel sorry about your sin?

The difference between remorse and repentance has nothing to do with the intensity of emotion you feel...but with its duration over time.

- It's not how bad you feel...
- it's what you do in response!

Now, you may ask...“well, am I truly repentant, or am I just remorseful?”

- *I struggle with sin.*
- *Sometimes I fall.*
- *Sometimes I doubt.*
- *Sometimes I grow cold.*
- *Does that mean I'm not repentant?”*

Not necessarily...you see, even the greatest Bible characters fall back into old sinful habits...sometimes really bad ones...

- Peter denied Jesus three times in the space of an evening.
- One of Paul's travelling companions, a guy named John Mark,
 - abandoned the mission field because it got difficult,
 - only to be restored later.
- King David committed adultery, murdered, lied about it, and refused to repent for nearly a year.
 - You realize we wouldn't hire him at Fathom, don't you?
- Abraham doubted God so severely that he told another man his wife was his sister just to save his own skin!

Listen, as a believer, you will struggle with residual sin for the rest of your life. But the question is, what do you do when you fall?

- Do you repent to God?
- Do you return to him?
- Or do you run away from him?

You ask, *"how do I know if I'm truly repentant?"*

The best proof of your repentance is its tenacity.

TRANSITION

This is the first thing Samuel directs them in:

- repentance is more than a feeling of remorse and regret...
- but it actually ought to cut into your very behaviors.
- Bear fruit! Put away those gods!

Now, on to the next point. Verse 5:

1 SAMUEL 7:5-7

[5] Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." [6] So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. [7] Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines.

EXPLAIN

So, the Israelites are in process of repenting.

- They're putting away their false Gods.
- They're praying and fasting.
- But the Philistines hear about this,
- and they make a move against Israel.
- They gather at Mizpah to go to war with Israel.

Now, what does Israel do? Do they do what they've done in the past?

- *"Samuel...let's press pause on this worship service..."*
- *We've gotta go to war!*
- *Get the ark!*
- *We need to win this battle!"*

No!

Look at what they do in verse 8:

1 SAMUEL 7:8-11

[8] And the people of Israel said to Samuel, “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.” [9] So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. [10] As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel. [11] And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.

POINT 2: RELY

The Israelites don't move

- to weapons,
- or to a gimmick,
- or to manipulate God,
- or to their own strength.

No, first they REPENT. Second, they **SLIDE RELY** on God.

- They turn to desperate prayer.
- They show complete reliance on God
- through the faithful prayers of the Prophet Samuel.

Again, we said this in the first week of this series, **but do you see prayer as your last resort, or your first line of defense?**

Have you ever seen this in your life?

- How God seems to shave away
- everything you thought you could depend on
- until you finally realize
- that all you really do have is desperate prayer...
- to rely completely on the mercy of God.

I mean, this is what we did this week in praying and fasting for Baby Leni!

We RELY on God!

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EXPLAIN: INTERCESSOR

But I want you to notice something else here as well...

- the people are not relying only on their own prayers...
- but they beg Samuel to pray for them.
- Samuel is the intercessor for them.

And this is a foreshadow for us, church!

- Don't you see that we have the same offer?
- No, it's not Samuel praying for you...
- nor like the Roman Catholics
 - do we believe that Mary
 - or any of the saints pray for you.

But just like Samuel...the Prophet, the Priest...

- we too have a better interceder.
- A better prophet. A better high priest!

Paul says as much in Romans 8:

SLIDE ROMANS 8:31-35

[31] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

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Jesus Christ himself is praying for you!

Nothing ought to move you, and strengthen you, and encourage you more than the fact that there is one who intercedes for you.

This is even true when someone in this life is praying for you. Right?

ILLUSTRATION: YOUTH PRAYING FOR ME

I got my first job as a youth pastor in a church right out of college.

- And right after being hired,
- they had already made plans
- to take the high school students to a conference.

Now, I really didn't know the kids well...

- I was brand new...
- so, the kids had great relationships with the volunteers,
- but I was just the new high school youth pastor to them.

Now, right before taking those students on the trip my parents informed me that they were getting divorced.

- And so, I was just starting to process that myself
- and a few days into the trip,
- I'm leading a small group break out session
- with some of the high school boys,
- and when it comes time to share about
- what's going on in our lives and prayer requests,
- I decided to model vulnerability
- and share what was going on with my parents.

Now, I did this thinking, *"Oh, I'll be the wise and strong youth pastor, and these kids will see a model of Christian maturity!"*

- But as I was telling them,
- the emotions of it all hit me,
- and I just broke down.
- I hadn't even realized how hard it was hitting me.

But an amazing thing happened.

- These 13, 14, 15-year-old boys came around me,
- and they laid their hands on me,
- and they prayed over me and my family.

And I mean, some of these kids were barely Christians...

- I mean, I'm pretty sure some of their prayers
- were straight up heresy.

But I don't know if there was a more impactful moment in processing my parent's divorce than these teenage boys interceding for me.

TRANSITION

- There's just something about it
- when someone prays for you
- IT MOVES YOU!
- How much more when that someone is Jesus Christ himself?

In Israel's repentance...

- they now live it out by relying on God to save them...
- and he does save them!
- The Lord thunders...
- and throws the Philistines into confusion...
- and they are defeated.

Now, on to the last aspect of this FREE RETURN from Samuel.

Look at verse 12:

1 SAMUEL 7:12-14

[12] Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, "Till now the LORD has helped us." [13] So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. [14] The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

POINT 3: REMEMBER

- We REPENT to God...
- We RELY on God...
- and now, we **SLIDE REMEMBER** God's faithfulness to us!

The Israelites

- have repented and put away their false gods.
- They have relied on God in desperate prayer.
- And God delivered them!

But now Samuel says,

- *"let's set up a stone...*
- *let's call it Ebenezer,"*
 - which means stone of help.
- Why do this?
- So, we'll remember that the Lord helped us.

Oh church, we are so prone to forget God's faithfulness to us.

When you are walking in the middle of trial, it is so difficult to see the hand of God.

How many of you, Christians,

- have been able to look back at your past,
- and even some of the things
- that you thought were unfair and terrible,
- that turned out to be his grace on you?

Even some of the times you thought you were being attacked...

Were really God working in the details of your trial for your good. Right?

- They say that hindsight is 20/20,
- but in the present, man, it is so hard to see.
- This is why Samuel raises up Ebenezer.

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ILLUSTRATION: BLOOD TRAIL

I like to illustrate it this way: I met a guy a few years back who's a hunter, and he's got a TV show where he goes on all these sweet hunts.

- And so, a couple years back I was messaging him,
- while he was on this big deer hunt,
- and he's telling me how to blood trail a deer.

I didn't know how this worked, cause I don't hunt.

- I'll eat the meat if y'all hunt,
- but I just don't have time in my life for another hobby.

So, let me tell you how to blood trail an animal. Ok?

- After you shoot a deer or an elk,
 - you've gotta try to find it.
- They wander away,
- sometimes into the woods...

So, they scour the ground for the first little piece of evidence:

- a bit of blood or hair or something.
- And they mark it with some tape.

And then they start walking

- and they find the next little bit of blood or whatever.
- And they mark it.
- And you keep going and mark.
- And keep going and mark.

I don't see anyone writing this down!

People, I'm trying to tell you how to blood trail a deer.

This is important!

Now, inevitably,

- You'll get to a spot where it opens up
- and you lose the trail,
- and you don't know where he went,
- and the evidence is hard to find.
- And you look and look,
- but he's nowhere to be found.

And that's what those little markers were put up for.

- So that you can look back over your shoulder,
- and you can begin to see the line of marks,
- and identify the trail that he might have been on, because...
- what he did in the past
- will help you to understand
- the direction he's now going.

APPLICATION: MARKERS

Church, the Ebenezer is an Old Testament blood trail.

- It's a mark for them to see God's faithfulness in the past.
- So that when they find themselves in those dark places
- where they're having trouble finding evidence of God...
- they can remember the blood trail.

And you need some Ebenezers in your life.

- You need to be able to look back, over your shoulder,
- at the marks of God's faithfulness to you.
- What are the points in your life?
 - where God did something?
 - or showed you something?
 - or provided you with something?

You need to remember that blood trail.

- And you know what the number one,
 - always present,
 - Ebenezer that you can always look back to?
- You want to know what mark you look at
 - when you wonder if God will be faithful?
- If God is really good and he will really keep his promises?

That mark is the thing right over my shoulder. It's the cross.

Because of Romans 5:8 – “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

The cross is the empirical evidence that “Till now the Lord has helped us.”

CONCLUSION

So church, the Lord offers FREE RETURNS.

Maybe you're feeling that today...

- you have at some point
- and in some way
- gotten away from him...
- and today you are lamenting after the Lord.

I would ask you to seriously consider the aspects that Samuel models.

If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart...

- what do you need to repent of?
 - What things do you need to put away?
- In what ways do you need to rely on God?
 - What sort of desperate prayers
 - do you need to start praying,
 - or that you need to share with others
 - so, they can begin to intercede on your behalf.
- And what markers or Ebenezers do you need to look back on?
 - Do you remember his faithfulness to you thus far?

Never once has he left you.

Never once has he abandoned you.

Never once has he forsaken you.

Till now the Lord has helped us...

This is what we do every week when we come to the Lord's Supper...to communion. **Do this in remembrance of me.**

- Hear me, sometimes,
- that will be almost the only blood marker
- that will sustain you in your walk with Jesus.

Till now the Lord has helped us.

Let's pray. **LYRICS SLIDE W/PADS**

RESPONSES:

Well, every week at Fathom we respond in 4 ways:

- COMMUNION – THE LORD’S SUPPER
- GIVING TITHES & OFFERINGS – fathomchurch.org/give
- PRAYER - fathomchurch.org/prayer
- SINGING

So, I’m going to read the Words of Institution from the Apostle Paul, we’ll take communion, and then we’ll sing:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26 – WORDS OF INSTITUTION

[23] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

[25] In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

[26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Love you church, let’s stand and sing together.

RESOURCES USED:

- Davis, Dale Ralph. 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart.
- David, Dale Ralph. *Resolution Time*.
- Tsumura, David Toshio. The First Book of Samuel.