

WARNING SIGNS OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP

1 SAMUEL 14:24-52

CHURCH GROUP SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE - AUGUST 9, 2026

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Samuel 14:24-52 (ESV)

ICE BREAKER QUESTION

Think of the best—and worst—boss, coach, or teacher you’ve ever had. Without naming names, what was one thing that made the best one so great (or the worst one so miserable) to be around?

SERMON RECAP

- Saul’s rash oath—that the men could eat no food until “I am avenged on my enemies”—turned God’s lavish provision (honey, a biblical picture of blessing and abundance) into a source of fear, and left his own army famished and faint. Even his son Jonathan was able to acknowledge the foolishness of the decision: “My father has troubled the land.”
- Instead of being a joyful blessing to the people he led, Saul’s leadership became a dreadful burden. When God refused to answer his prayer, Saul launched a witch hunt for someone else’s sin and was ready to execute his own son. Everyone could see the problem with Saul except Saul.
- Pastor Mike used Steve Jobs as a modern illustration of a man of undeniable genius and outward success who was nevertheless known by those closest to him as harsh, demoralizing, and cruel. Like Saul, outward success by human standards can mask spiritual failure by God’s standards.
- Four warning signs of toxic leadership: (1) leveraging religion without really living it, (2) being more committed to your own agenda than God’s agenda, (3) being known for using people more than caring for them, and (4) seeing everyone else’s failures while staying blind to your own.
- Jesus is the anti-Saul. His leadership is gentle and lowly: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). Don’t let a poor representative distort your view of the real Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Observation: What does this passage say?

1. What oath did Saul impose on his soldiers, and what reason did he give for it (v. 24)? What two little words in his statement reveal whose agenda was really driving him?
2. Consider how the soldiers are described throughout the passage (vv. 24, 26, 28, 31). What happened to Jonathan when he tasted the honey (v. 27), and what did he say about his father’s command (vv. 29-30)?
3. Compare how the people respond to Saul (“Do whatever seems good to you,” vv. 36, 40) with how Jonathan’s armor-bearer responded to him (“Behold, I am with you heart and soul,” v. 7). What happens when Saul sentences Jonathan to death (v. 45)?

Interpretation: What does the passage mean?

1. Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land” (v. 29). What did he mean by that? How did Saul manage to turn God’s provision (i.e., honey in a land “flowing with milk and honey”) into a burden, and deliverance into distress?
2. Why did God refuse to answer Saul’s prayer (v. 37)? Saul assumes the sin must be the fault to someone else and casts lots to find the culprit. What does this reaction reveal about his self-awareness and his spiritual condition?
3. The chapter closes by noting Saul’s military victories (vv. 47-48), yet Scripture presents him as a failed leader. What is the difference between success by human standards and godly leadership as described in 2 Samuel 23:3-4 and modeled by Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30?

Application: How can we apply this passage to our lives?

1. Of the four warning signs (leveraging religion without living it, pursuing your agenda over God’s, using people rather



than caring for them, and blindness to your own failures) which one are you most vulnerable to in the places you lead (e.g., home, work, church)? Is there anyone you need to apologize to this week, and what would that conversation sound like?

2. Have you suffered under toxic leadership in a way that has affected your faith? How does Jesus' gentle, life-giving leadership (Matthew 11:28-30) correct the distorted picture a poor representative may have given you of God?
3. In light of Pastor Mike's message, is there anyone you need to apologize to? When will you do it?