Sunday, March 25, 1979
I'M THE EXCEPTION
I Samuel 28:3-10

King Saul, a deeply religious man, issued an executive order that all wizards, mediums, and fortunetellers were to be banished from Israel. He knew that consulting such persons has usually been the means by which people, when they become desperate, look for simple, ready-made, easy answers.

It's not too much different in our own time. We, too, want immediate answers to difficult problems and decisions. The modern equivalents are everything from mediums to astrologers, to religious cults, to supposed sages who provide pat answers in the newspapers or on radio or television. It's a way of avoiding the tough decisions that face all of us from time to time. We forget there are a great many human problems for which there are no simple, easy, quick, ready-made solutions. Most of the time we have to live the questions and struggle through to the answers. The glib instantaneous solution which is often offered to human perplexity or human misery is a form of quackery in every age.

So, King Saul issued an order that all mediums and wizards were to be driven from the land. It was a courageous act. He knew that knowledge of God's will and purpose did not come through fortune tellers or mediums. He would not tolerate the practice of witchcraft in Israel.

But when Saul got into trouble, he broke his own rule. Even though he had been victorious in earlier battles and had led his armies courageously, now he was afraid. Furthermore, he was envious and jealous of David, and jealousy makes us do things we would not ordinarily do, as does fear that we are losing our power. Terrified by the strength of the enemy, tormented by his own jealousy and fear, he sought answers from God. But God seemed not to answer, and Saul quickly lost his patience. He decided that he needed answers and needed them quickly. Thus, in desperation the King said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go and consult her and inquire of her," and his servants replied, "Behold there is a medium at Endor."

Notice how quickly Saul changed the rules for himself. He had banished all mediums and wizards from the land, but when Saul himself got into trouble, when God seemed far away or didn't answer quickly enough, he said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium that I may consult her." If God won't give me the answers I want and when I want them, I'll find some other way to get them. This is surely one of the most human stories in the Bible. A man recognizing a public evil as evil, but when the pinch comes, makes an exception of himself. Saul resorted to a practice which in his better moments he fervently condemned. "I'm the exception!"

Saul was intellectually and morally sound in legislating all such people out of the kingdom. But when he became frightened and desperate, it never occurred to him that it would be disastrous to break the law himself. Most of us like Saul are able to see the value and truth of moral rules; but most of us also are unable to understand why we ourselves are not able to break these same rules with no hurt. It's part of the age-old temptation to make an exception of ourse1ves.

We all do it from time to time in little ways that are not very harmful and in big ways that are. There was a husky young lad who entered a bookstore and purchased two leather-bound Bibles. One of them, he explained, was for himself, the other for a man at where he worked

that he was trying to convert. He explained that gambling was rampant there and the man he was trying to convert was the ringleader. As the clerk wrapped the Bibles, she said, “I hope you succeed in converting him.” “I do too,” said the purchaser, “they’ve bet me five to three that I can’t.”

There are all kinds of situations in which we make an exception of ourselves. Overwhelmingly the statistics show that smoking is a major contributor to cancer, heart disease and numerous other health problems, but most people who smoke believe they are the exception. Thus, a front-page article in the Wall Street Journal last week had the headline — WHO WOULD SMOKE CIGARETTES OVERLOADED WITH TAR, NICOTINE? And the article revealed that millions do. The story was about one of the most successful products in sales ever produced — a cigarette called CAMEL.

Today, the article said, there appears to be little reason for Camel’s continued survival. In an industry where advertising is crucial to the success of the 170 competing brands, Camels aren’t advertised. In a market where low tar, highly filtered cigarettes are rapidly becoming the top-sellers, a single Camel cigarette still delivers a blast of 25 milligrams of unfiltered tar. That’s more than an entire pack of some brands. Yet Camels are still the seventh best-selling brand in the United States.

All of us are theoretically in favor of good health habits, but for everyone else. We’re the exception. Two of the three community hospitals in Lincoln still sell cigarettes in their lobbies while just down the halls and in the rooms on the other floors as well, some of the patients are there because of health problems related to smoking. And I suppose as a group, physicians are not the best examples of persons practicing the health rules which they prescribe for the rest of us. I’m the exception. The rules are for others.

In our families, our children quickly pick up the habit of making an exception which they get from us as parents. The rules are for the children, but not for us. I’ll never forget one man I knew in Chicago. He was a police officer. In Chicago, then and I think still now, the rule was that all police officers who were part of the Chicago police force had to live within the city limits. This man didn’t. He thought the rule was basically a good one, but he made an exception of himself. He lived for years far outside the city limits in the little suburb where he and his family were members of the church I served. For fear of losing his job if anyone ever found out and reported him, he kept his job a secret from his neighbors. His children were instructed never to tell anyone what he did for a living. He kept a legal address at his parent’s home in the city. In a sense he lived a lie. If his wife was ironing or mending his uniform and the doorbell rang, she had to first quickly hide the uniform and then nervously answer the door.

This man was very strict with his children. Often, he told me that he didn’t want his children to grow up to be young punks with no respect for the rules of society. His oldest son became a shoplifter as a teenager. Furthermore, he came to tell more and more lies to his parents so that it was almost impossible to tell the truth from falsehood when he spoke. His father simply could not understand it. Why should his son tell lies? Yet the father thought that he could be the exception and it would have no effect.

I remember a conversation with a young man recently who traveled the country frequently as part of his job and so he was aware of what was going on in many cities large and small. What he deplored the most, he said, was the dishonesty of police officers and other public servants. But then, not too long after that, I heard the same man describing how he always carried a ten-dollar bill clipped to his driver’s license so that he could easily attempt to bribe any police

officer who tried to give him a ticket for speeding or for some other traffic violation. He also frequently bragged about getting some tickets fixed through local politicians. He had a habit of making an exception of himself.

A large part of what got former President Nixon and other members of his administration in trouble in the Watergate episode was the practice of believing, “I’m the exception. The laws apply to everyone but us.”

Breaking and entering is against the law, but when in trouble or when desperate, then it’s all right to ignore the law and make an exception of oneself.

Most people are against pornography, but many of the same persons who speak out most boldly against it are the ones who believe they are the exception. How often I have heard parents say, “I want my children to have a good and solid religious upbringing;” in fact all people should; but a look at their lives shows that they make an exception of themselves.

We are all against inflation, but not when fighting inflation might keep our own salary from being raised. Congressmen of both parties regularly speak out against high federal expenditures, except of course those expenditures needed for their own pet projects back home. Those are never inflationary. It’s only those others that are. It’s typical of our human nature to be strongly in favor of particular rules or guidelines for everyone else, but to make an exception in our own case, particularly when we get desperate. And usually when we make an exception of ourselves in such situations, we are more a part of the problem than the answer to the problem.

But for we who call ourselves Christians, there are ways in which we are to be the exception because we are followers of Jesus Christ. St. Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, put it this way: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. I bid every one of you not to think of himself or herself more highly than one ought to think.”

As Christians we are not to make exceptions of ourselves, but rather we are to be exceptional people because we do not conform to the ways of the world. Another translation puts St. Paul’s words this way — “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your· minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all God’s demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity...Don’t cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance.”

Jesus Christ often talked about the kind of exceptions we are to be when we live according to the faith. He said — “The ways of the world are to love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, be the exception, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of God who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.”

Be the exception! You are to be different because you know that God loves you and that God forgives you! Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold. Be the exception and do not be anxious about your life. Do not be anxious about tomorrow. Judge not that you be not judged. Be the exception — be different from the ordinary ways of the world in the right way.

As Christians we are to be exceptional persons, not because God loves only us, not in order to earn God's favor, but because we know that God loves not only us but all people. Since God loves our enemies, we are to love our enemies.

And there is a third point in this matter of exceptions: God does not make exceptions. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son." God loves the whole world, not just the church, not just Christians, but God's love is for everyone — all we have to do is to be open to that love, accept it, receive it, invite it into our lives. God makes no exceptions. God does not love the righteous person more than the sinner, or the sinner more than the righteous. God's love is constant and equal. God does not love the Christian more than the atheist, or the capitalist more than the communist, or the white person more than the black person. There are no exceptions to God's love and care, only the exceptions that we mistakenly make. Amen.