

## GETTING IT RIGHT

### 1 Samuel 24

Last week we were thinking about the way the New Testament beatitudes are illustrated in the life of David. One of these beatitudes is 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' and the incident in 1 Samuel chapter 24 is a particularly apt illustration of that beatitude. This chapter is all about two leaders and two sets of followers. The two leaders were Saul and David.

Saul was on a downward track, developing an increasingly psychopathic hatred of David, whom he regarded as his main rival for the throne. He was obsessed with killing David. He hunted him down like a lion stalking its prey. It led him to do mad things. The strategy which is described at the beginning of our chapter was madness. It was wild wilderness terrain, not at all suitable for leading an army of three thousand soldiers into. The name says it all: 'the Crag of the Wild Goats'. It was more suited to guerrilla fighting than conventional warfare.

Worse was to come. Saul had banished mediums and spiritists from the land but he ended up tracking one down, the witch of Endor, and asking her to bring up Samuel from the dead. The Bible gives clear warnings about messing with the occult. What an irony that Saul, who had outlawed mediums, should end up consulting one. He was supposed to have banished them from the land, but when his men were asked they knew where to find one. This is what Jesus meant when he talked about the broad road that leads to destruction. I don't suppose it was easy when he was trying to get rid of all the mediums but when he wanted to find one it was no problem. When you want to do the wrong thing it's not difficult to find a way.

How did Saul end up like this, full of hatred and bitterness and violence? There was that occasion in chapter 13 when Saul took it upon himself to offer the burnt offering instead of waiting for Samuel, the sin of impatience and pride. On the face of it, it doesn't look like such a big deal, but it was disobedience to the clear command of God. That was the start of the slippery slope. It's the little sins that are so easy to excuse in ourselves that set us on a downward track.

There was another occasion, recorded in chapter 14, when Saul acted foolishly. His army were fighting the Philistines and with God's help they defeated them. As the Philistines were running away Saul and his army went after them. Saul bound them with an oath: 'Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes' (verse 24). The soldiers were really fed up. Because of the oath they weren't 'fed up,' if you see what I mean. They were ravenously hungry.

But worse was to come. Jonathan had been on an independent sortie and hadn't heard about the oath. So he went ahead and did the obvious thing and ate something. Saul acted foolishly and through his foolishness brought a curse on his own son. The problem this time was going beyond what God required, setting an unrealistic demand which was all too easily broken.

We need to be wary of forbidding what God has not forbidden and enforcing what God has not enforced. Paul learned about a situation like this in the Colossian church, people who were making up rules which had not come from God. This is what he said. 'Why do you submit to the world's rules, as if you still belonged to the world? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" Regulations like these may appear to be full of wisdom but actually they are of no value.'

Later, writing to Timothy, Paul warns about false teachers. 'They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer' (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

It's a great temptation to turn Christianity into a whole bunch of negative 'Don'ts'. Of course there are harmful things to be avoided but the essence of Christianity is positive. Jesus said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

Saul did what God had commanded him not to do. Saul added burdens and demands beyond anything that God required. And in chapter 15 of 1 Samuel we find Saul *failing* to do what God *had* clearly commanded. After he had defeated the Amalekites he kept the best of the spoil when God had clearly commanded that it should all be destroyed.

Doing what God had forbidden, adding to what God expected, and now failing to do what God had commanded. These were the steps that led Saul down the slippery slope of disobedience to God, a slope that grew steeper with every step, until the slide was unstoppable.

What is God saying to us through this? Is there something God has forbidden in his word, but you're doing it anyway? Is there some rule you've made up, some standard you expect, and it's not actually God's commandment but a man-made tradition? It's feeding your ego but it's making everybody else miserable? Could you actually be bringing down a curse unwittingly on a member of your own family? Is there something that God has commanded and you're refusing to do it?

When Saul became king the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power but in chapter 16 verse 14 we read, 'The Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.' He was still in God's hands. The sovereign LORD who had anointed him was still in control, but from this time on he was subject to an evil spirit. His life wasn't a vacuum. He didn't just become a nice, secular guy. Evil took over his life and he was a tormented soul.

Saul spectacularly didn't get it right. Neither did the men who followed him. Listen to these words of David to Saul in 1 Samuel 24:9. 'He said to Saul, "Why do you listen when men say, "David is bent on harming you"?' Part of Saul's trouble was bad advice. When he bad-mouthed David and stirred up hatred against him there were people who said, 'Yes, that's right. David is your enemy. He is out to harm you.' It was all lies, and deep down they knew it, but they didn't like David and so it didn't bother them.

It worries me that we live in a culture where lies are common currency. Glossy magazines and tabloid newspapers thrive on lies, on gossip, on malice. We know it, they know it, everyone knows it, and yet it goes on and it's getting bigger. Politics is supposed to be above lies but propaganda is all about massaging the facts, putting the right spin on them, manipulating the truth.

Here's another lie that we're bombarded with in our culture. It doesn't matter what you do in your private life as long as you're efficient in your public duty. Politically Saul was quite an effective leader. He led successful military campaigns against the Philistines. But morally and spiritually he was bankrupt. God does not distinguish between what we are in public and what we are in private. He sees the heart.

And so we come to David, who on this occasion did get it right. This is the first of two occasions when he had the chance to kill Saul and refused to do so. In one way it was a very obvious thing to do. Had Saul not been rejected by God? Had David himself not been anointed by Samuel? What was the point of risking death at the hands of Saul when he could be free of him for ever? Here was the perfect opportunity. There was Saul, relieving himself! The Bible puts it so delicately, but there was something rather apt about the opportunity and I'm sure David's men were not blind to the irony of it.

Talking about David's men, here's what they said to him. Verse 4: 'This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, "I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'"

Who were these men? They are described in chapter 22 verses 1 and 2. 'David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him.' His family came round. It was probably too dangerous for them to do any different. But the majority of David's fighting force were a ragamuffin collection of ne'er-do-wells and problem cases. They were not exactly the best people to have as your counsellors.

We're told that God often guides through the alignment of three factors: his word, circumstances, and the counsel of people we trust. Apply this to David's situation. According to his men God had spoken. 'This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said, "I will give your enemy into your hands."' The circumstances all suggested this was his opportunity and his men were urging him to take it. The lights of guidance all seemed to be lining up, but David didn't take Saul's life. He simply crept up unnoticed, cut off a corner of Saul's robe and let him leave. Why?

### **1. He had respect for authority.**

Verses 7 and 8: 'Saul left the cave and went his way. Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.' Verse 10: 'This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, "I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the LORD's anointed."'

David had a respect for authority. We live in an age when there is little respect for authority and the excuse people give is that authority figures have to earn respect and they have failed to do so. In contrast to that the Bible consistently encourages us to honour those who are in authority. Romans chapter 13 spells this out for us. The reason is that all authority is given by God and he is the ultimate authority. That was why David would not harm Saul. 'I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the LORD's anointed.'

### **2. He had a tender conscience.**

As his men watched with bated breath and rising excitement David crept forward and — cut a piece off Saul's robe. What an anticlimax! Verse 5 says, 'Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD."'

Conscience-stricken. Writing to Timothy Paul warns him about 'hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.' Writing to the Ephesians he speaks about those who 'having lost all sensitivity, have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more'. The first step in that descent into evil is a loss of sensitivity but the way to please God is to remain sensitive, to keep a tender conscience.

### **3. He had complete trust in God.**

When David crept forward to where Saul was crouching his men must have been almost beside themselves with excitement. When David returned with just the corner of Saul's robe and they watched Saul leave the cave they must have been almost beside themselves with disappointment. But worse was to come. Verse 8: 'Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.'

I can just imagine David's men saying, 'Oh no! What's he doing now?' What was it that gave David the confidence to confront Saul like that, to make himself vulnerable in such

a dangerous situation? It was his absolute trust in God. Verse 12: 'May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you.' Verse 15: 'May the LORD be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand.'

This reminds me of Peter's words concerning Jesus in 1 Peter 2:23, 'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.'

Sometimes the right thing is not the most obvious thing. Often the right way is the narrow way, the difficult option. Circumstances and well-meant advice are not always the deciding factors.

David did do the right thing. He didn't lose his respect for authority. He didn't try to silence his conscience. His trust in God made him bold, bold to do the right thing even when it was a risky thing to do.

Getting it right. That should be our aim in life and these are the keys to success.