

June 10, 2018

Sermon Manuscript

1 Samuel 8:4-20 (ESV)

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.” ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. ¹¹He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. ¹²And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men^[a] and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us,²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

A Political Theology We Won't Have to Answer to Jesus For

(1 Samuel 8:4-20)

This morning our lesson from 1 Samuel describes one of the most pivotal events in the Old Testament when after almost a thousand years of not having a human monarch, the elders of Israel decide they want a king. What makes this request so significant is that up to this point Israel had been *unique* as a nation. They were privileged like no other nation because God had chosen them for Himself; they were God's chosen people. However, enjoying the benefits of life with God did require them to submit to certain constraints.

First of all, God had given his people the Ten Commandments, which we read last week. So, through the Ten Commandments this God had placed moral constraints on His people. And yet, the benefit was... that so long as the Israelites obeyed these commands, their lives would be much more harmonious than those of the other nations around Israel, because these commandments served to line their lives up with the way God had created humans to live.

However, the moral constraints of being God's people are not the concern of our 1 Samuel passage today. Instead, here the Israelites are dissatisfied with the political and military constraints that also came with being God's people.

You see, both politically and militarily Israel differed greatly from the nations around them. To begin with, the Israelites did not have a centralized government. Instead, God had chosen to organize Israel as a federation of twelve tribes, without a king, because God was their king. He did for them everything a king was meant to do, but in spades. So, for example, militarily the Lord had led them into the Promised Land of Canaan where he commanded them to drive out all of the inhabitants. And for this conquest, God did raise up a human leader in Joshua, to lead the people. But the *book* of Joshua makes clear that Joshua was always subordinate to God's command (Josh 5:13-15). Time and again God would tell them to go up and attack this people or defeat that town – each time the Lord would go before them and fight *for* them, making clear that all of Israel's victories were really the Lord's victories. And the same went for the period of Judges, which was the period Israel had been in *since* Joshua. God had raised up men like Gideon and Samson and finally Samuel, it was clear that the victories they experienced were through God's will and power.

But I should also be clear that, unlike the nations they were coming up against, Israel lacked a standing army. Instead, their fighters were assembled from the different tribes on an as-needed basis. And they actually used mostly "primitive" weapons, such as farm and household tools – or at best bronze weapons – while their opponents, like the Philistines, possessed much more sophisticated and durable iron weapons.

So God called the shots for the Israelites militarily: God dictated when they went into battle and how they did it. The Israelites were utterly dependent upon His will *and* power. And yet, the benefit was... they had the Lord fighting for them. And time and again the Lord handed their enemies into their hands. #

And yet, as our passage opens, the Israelites had grown dissatisfied with this arrangement, discontent. And you may be thinking, "well how?" But certainly we can imagine how uncomfortable it may have been for the Israelites to sit there surrounded by nations with standing armies, while they're sitting here with a ragtag group of guys with pitchforks. Just imagine how much faith and trust in God that would've required. Sure God had always been faithful, but what about the next time? Could they trust He would be again?

But instead, Israel had begun looking at the nations around and recognizing that *if they did have a standing army* and if they developed the capacity to produce iron weaponry, they could potentially enjoy some *real military gains* to expand their kingdom. But because of their military inferiority, they depended on getting the green light from God to attack anyone. So all of this potential they saw remained unrealized.

And all of this comes to a head in verse 4 of our passage, when the elders of Israel gather together at Ramah and ask Samuel to appoint for them a king to rule them like all the other nations.

But verse 6 tells us this displeases Samuel, and afterward we learn it displeases the Lord as well. However, the point here not that monarchies are inherently evil or that the kingship God will end up giving them will be illegitimate. Rather, by making this request,

the leaders are revealing their dissatisfaction with having God act as their king and their belief that somehow a human king will do better.

In effect, fear, greed, & a desire to secure themselves has caused the Israelites to grow weary of having to do things the Lord's way and to believe there are better ways to secure themselves. And it's not that they want God to take a hike or that they *expect* Him to abandon them, they just think some of the ways the nations around get things done would yield *even better* results. #

But, perhaps surprisingly, God responds by telling Samuel to give them what they want. He's not really surprised by their unfaithful attitude – at this point it's sorta become par for the course with the Israelites – and God will never *force* anyone to rely on him. But God tells Samuel to warn them that giving up their uniqueness in order to operate like the world will ultimately be a net loss to them.

Beginning in verse 11, Samuel says,

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. ¹² And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

Samuel is pointing out that while the grass may seem greener on the other side, having a king actually has more than a few drawbacks the Israelites may not be accounting for. For example, a monarchy requires the establishment of an administration, as well as a standing army, who must all be housed and fed. Having an army will also necessitate supporting career commanders, which Israel had not had before. And the upgraded weaponry would need to be manufactured; chariots and horsemen would require stabling for the animals and training. And another thing about kings is they demand to be *treated* like kings, which requires servants, taxation, and the confiscation of prime properties for palaces.

Samuel's saying, “Do you really understand what you're asking for?” Doing things God's way you've been playing a game you can't lose, but now you'd rather give all of that up to be like the world and play a game that you're sure to lose?

Yet Samuel's warning falls on deaf ears; the elders of Israel have their mind made up. And yet, not only does everything Samuel has predicted come true, but failures of Israel's kings will eventually lead their kingdom to divide, and then be conquered and taken into exile. ## ##

But what difference does any of this make for us? Well, *unfortunately* the Israelites' bullheaded insistence to turn toward the ways of the world parallels a similar temptation that plagues Christians even to this day: and that is the temptation to treat worldly politics as ultimate.

[Now I'm aware that some people don't like me preaching on politics. And I have no idea who first said you should leave politics out of church, I just know it wasn't Jesus 😊 To the contrary, it's because we can so easily allow politics consume us, and become an idol, that I'd be doing you a disservice if I just ignored it.]

See, as followers of Christ we enjoy an even *more* unique position than Israel did, because Jesus has opened an opportunity for us to live as citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world. Paul writes that as disciples of Jesus "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). In Peter's first letter he calls us "temporary residents and exiles" here in the world (1 Peter 2:11). And indeed, in the gospel of John Jesus essentially tells Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my followers would be playing by the world's rules, but it's not" (18:36). And yet, like Israel, we are extremely vulnerable to giving up our uniqueness, often unwittingly, in order to play by the world's rules.

Now, what is so wonderful about this kingdom life Jesus had invited us all into it is truly the life humans were created to live. But its foundational moral principle is what we know as the two Greatest Commandments:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mathew 22:37-39)

And there is nothing more contrary to the ways of the world than that. But making this our aim, and seeking the Lord's help to live this way, is the path for us to experience true life and freedom, because it's how God created us to live; it's what He made us to do. #

But in addition to the Two Greatest Commandments being the foundational moral principle of the kingdom life, this Kingdom also has a foundational political principal: that **Jesus is our king**; not the rulers of the world, not Caesar. And the benefits of making Jesus our king are unmatched, because He promises to provide us with the provision, and eternal security and glory we need, but unlike worldly rulers he can actually be relied upon to fulfill his promises. ##

Of course, what we have to grapple with are hindrances to the kingdom life, caused by our sin, that are remarkably similar to what tripped up the Israelites. Greed, fear, and a desire to secure *ourselves* can all undermine our trust in Jesus and cause us to believe the world's levers of power will provide a better life than by doing things the Lord's way. This lie is what causes us to shift our hope away from Jesus, our King, and onto worldly politics. #

So how can we know when we've crossed over that line, where we are ceasing to operate in the kingdom of God and have instead allowed worldly politics to become ultimate?

Well, a good indicator is any time we find our hope resting in any political outcome. And it really doesn't matter which direction you lean politically; this is a temptation that entices all Christians and can easily ensnare, whether you lean to the right, left, or center.

And you know you've *been* ensnares when you have the attitude that "Everything will be okay if this political event will just happen. For example, I'm sure there are some among us who have thought "surely if Robert Mueller, the Special Counsel, could just get this or that guy to flip on Trump, the President would be exposed as a crook and impeached and this two year nightmare would be over; everything would be okay." Would it?

On the other hand there are probably others who instead believe "if Trump would just be allowed to carry out his agenda of 1) sticking it to China and all of these other countries who've been ripping America off and 2) shoring up the borders by getting a wall built, then this *decades*-long nightmare would be over and America would be 'great again'; everything would be okay." But would it?

Should we find our hopes pinned impeaching a president or building a wall or, on Robert Mueller or Donald Trump, that's a pretty good indication we're taking a detour – or taking a 'break' – from the kingdom life.

I was recently reminded of Psalm 146, which says,

³ Don't put your trust in human leaders;
no human being can save you.

⁴ When they die, they return to the dust;
on that day all their plans come to an end.

⁵ Happy are those who have the God of (Israel) to help them
and who depend on the LORD their God,

⁶ the Creator of heaven, earth, and sea... (GNT)

When we behave as if the root of our problems are external political circumstances with political remedies rather than the internal spiritual disorder of our own personal attitude and outlook, like fear and greed and the impulse to be self-reliant, then we are making the same mistake Israel did and playing a game we're sure to lose.

And when we do that no one pays the price more than us. Just like the Israelites paid an enormous price for shifting their hope onto a worldly power, whenever we allow politics to steal our hope and take us from living in the Kingdom, we're making a deal with the devil that is sure to cost us peace of mind and will undoubtedly compromise our witness, because we have abandoned what makes us unique; the hope that is meant to distinguish us from the rest of the world. # # #

Well, thank goodness there is grace; that there is forgiveness; that our God is merciful with us. Because it means we can always repent, always start again.

But how do we do that? If we have this *unique* status as citizens of Christ's kingdom, in what *unique* way should we be engaging worldly politics? Well, it should cause us to begin viewing politics and our political influence as just one tool among many that we have to be exercised in love for others. If we all agree God has called us to relate to others interpersonally unselfishly, why should our politics be some exception?

And the implications of this are huge. Because first of all, prioritizing love of neighbor would mean we abandon **politics of self-interest**. Now, you may say "well everyone votes self-

interest". What's the saying, "In the end, most everybody votes their pocketbooks". Yeah, but "everyone else is doing it" is not a defense that holds up to scripture. In fact, that was precisely the Israelites' reason for wanting to give up their unique status: they wanted a king because everyone else had one. But we're Christians; and Jesus is our king; so we trust that as long as we are faithful to Him, he will take care of our needs. So we make it our aim to live in the virtue of contentment, and not succumbing to those desires for greed and fear and control that doomed Israel, and this should free us up from the bondage of self-interest; should free us up to *care about the other*.

So, as Christians, the love of neighbor must be what informs how we engage politics. And this could lead us to engage politics to varying degrees and in all sorts of ways, but ultimately that engagement should be governed by sacrificial love – agape love – of others. So, for example, we may feel led to support the protection of our religious freedom, our motive should not be our own comfort, but to do that to the extent that is necessary for us to minister to others. But the Lord may also lead us to vote for a candidate or policy that could raise our taxes – gasp – should it genuinely benefit others.

Also, if we choose to support policies consistent with the Ten Commandments in some situation, this needs to be motivated by the love and protection of others. Unfortunately it is usually motivated by preserving our own comfort or trying to *play God* in others' lives. And some might rationalize that they are seeking to "defend God's honor", but God never asked us to do this! This is no our Great Commission! What God says honors him is sacrificing ourselves for the good of our neighbor. James 1 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (v27). As pastor & Author Dan White Jr recently wrote, "Christianity would change overnight if it put down the mantle of defending God and picked up the responsibility of loving enemies."

But of course, political choices are not often clear cut or unambiguous, which is why while it is one tool for loving our neighbor, it's a pretty dull and unreliable one. But I would be remised if I didn't say that engaging politics with the aim of loving our neighbor necessitates that we pray. Because politics are complicated; and only the Lord know the outcomes, and only He knows people's hearts.

But motive is enormous here. You could have two Christians who actually vote for the exact same candidate or proposition, or exercise the same political influence. But one could do so as a means to love others and do so in an appropriately detached way, and that action will be a positive spiritual effect on them. While the other may have placed their hope in that political outcome, and whether they get it or not there will be spiritual harm to their soul.

But whatever political influence we may have, when our ultimate motive is our own self-interest instead of the love of others, we have reduced Christianity to a political special interest group and surrendered our unique character as the bride of Christ, who *laid down* his rights for love.

The good news today is that we, as Christians, have been given the privilege of life in the kingdom, which allows us to partner with God to be a blessing in this world in ways that would never be possible without him. May God give us the courage to resist the temptation to opt for

playing the world's game, because it is one we sure to be a loss for us and others. While the one God has invited us to play – of not just saying Jesus is our King, but living that way – is one we are sure to win.

Amen.