



David in King Saul's Court d by Rembrandt

In looking for the features that tie the Old and New Testament lessons together, we can dwell for a few minutes on the common experiences that David and Paul shared, in their pursuit of God's will for their lives. There are certain characteristics common to both of these examples of Godly leaders. David faced constant battles with Israel's enemies when he was commanding the army of Saul. Then, upon his rebellion against Saul's wicked rule, David faced even greater hardships when he was struggling against Saul himself. Similarly, after his Damascus Road experience, Paul faced immense pain and suffering during his great missionary journeys, and twice in this second letter to the Church in

Corinth Paul describes some of the beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks and other suffering that he has endured in order to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. (See 2Cor. 6:3-10; 11:25) Apparently, hardship is forged peace-meal together with leading by Godly example. There's no getting away from suffering and sacrifice, if you're going to be a Godly leader.

Another trait which ties together these models of Christian leadership is restraint. In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, David could have easily killed the wealthy and selfish Calebite farmer Nabal, Abigail's first husband, for treating David and his men with tremendous disrespect, but David did not do so. (See 1Sam.25:9-35) And later, during the rebellion against the wicked King Saul, twice David spared his life in situations where he could have easily slain Saul. (See 1 sam.24:1-7; 26:7-12) Then too, the Apostle Paul was constantly encouraging the new Christians to a life of restraint. Some of his most valuable advice is to "live peaceably with all men," (See Rom. 12:14-18) and to "let your conversations be full of grace." (See Col. 4:6)

If one characteristic of Christian leadership is to be able to share the suffering of those you guide, and another trait is to show restraint, one final attribute of this Christian leadership model seems to be a clear devotion to the Word of God. When they finally came to David at Hebron to make him ruler over a united Kingdom in the passage you heard last week from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, they spoke of David as being selected by God to be the shepherd of God's people. ( 2Sam.5:2) So this is not a position that David has sought of his of his own accord, but one that God has ordained.

And when Paul writes to the Corinthians, the Romans, the Galatians, the Colossians, the Ephesians and all the other churches of the new Christian world, he is very clear to point out that all of these directions, and guidance, and encouragement are not of his own volition, but rather that they originate with the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, this morning in the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds us that it is not we who chose God, but rather God who "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." So, if you would confirm that it is God's will that you should take up a new responsibility of some kind, it apparently is always a good idea to verify that this is God's doing, and not our own.

Yet so often we forge ahead on our own volition, or get these things out of order, or want to leapfrog over the suffering or the restraint in order to short cut our way to prominence and glory – that is, our own glory and NOT the glory of the Lord. How many times have you seen or heard a candidate invoking the name of God in a political campaign, without any evidence of God actually be present in their life? And the same holds true for us. There seems to be an in-born quality in the human spirit that resonates with people who actually walk the walk **before** they talk the talk.

We are all, it would seem - just like Harry Truman - from Missouri, the "show-me state." We want to witness discipleship in our leaders before we hear them talk about their conversations with God and His impact on their lives. And, of course, the same goes for us as well. If we would lead others, we should first make it apparent to all that we are followers of God, and his son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sometimes, you will encounter people who simply will not follow even the best Godly leaders. How different Herod's life might have been if he had heeded the correction of John the Baptist to repent of Herod's adulterous life with his brother's wife, and desist from the other calamities sinful acts he was so prone to commit.

Things could have been very different for this Idumean Monarch in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, if he had turned from his sinful pride and self-centered life-style. And earlier in this Chapter of Mark's Gospel, as Jesus is sending out the Apostles to perform great signs and wonders among the people, The Lord specifically tells them, "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." (Mk.6:11)

It is possible, you see, through our own sinful anger and pride - just like so many in Jesus' home town - we too can choose to actually turn away the loving correction and the very grace of God which was specifically designed to save us forever, simply because it doesn't suit our petty plans for a pitiful future.

This was Michal's problem. When David came leaping into Jerusalem, ecstatic because the Arc of the Covenant itself, the dwelling place of the God of Heaven and Earth had finally been returned to Zion, Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife just couldn't get past her pre-conceptions as to what "dignified" behavior is supposed to be for an aristocrat. Michal's adherence to a dress code, and an obsession over fashion was much more important to her than a joyous sense of the victory of her Lord. How sad, when people let their usually self-centered ideas about what is "appropriate" separate them from the call of God on their life. Church congregations do that, you know - cling to ideas about what is "appropriate" worship, giving that precedence even over the ability to reach desperate people with the great good news of Jesus Christ. And so churches often turn away people because they don't dress, or act, or look "quite right" in the eyes of some. Yes, churches can hurt you know. Oh yes, churches can wound, and cripple, and hurt with the very best of them.

We can - and often do - refuse to accept God's loving correction and grace, even when confronted with it head-on, simply because we humans don't like what God has to say about us. That was the problem for so many people in Jesus's home town when the Lord came back for a visit. They couldn't get past the fact that here was, in their eyes, no-one any more important than the eldest son of the local furniture maker. It must be very sad to admit at the end of a life that, yes, the Kingdom of God has come very near you, and yet you let it pass you by.

But evidently, in Nazareth, there were at least a few people who were willing to put away their sense of righteous indignation and listen in humility to the corrective message that Jesus had to give. There were evidently some in Ephesus who did not harden their hearts, people who were willing to look the truth full in the face when Paul showed that truth to them, even if it meant seeing something in themselves that needed changing.

And, what does Paul say about these people, these brothers and sisters who were willing to stare truth full in the face? He says this morning of them that they are "sealed by the Holy Spirit." (See Eph. 1:13) You may recognize that from our Baptismal Covenant. What does it mean to bear the seal of the Holy Spirit? Evidently it has a lot to do with being willing to welcome correction when it comes. Bearing the seal of the Holy Spirit apparently means living out a testament to the grace of God, above all else, with a sense of humility. It isn't really grace if we think it's something we're entitled too.

Salvation comes in the form of God's grace only when we're convinced of how much we don't deserve it. So, to **really** be saved, the first thing you and I need to do is to listen lovingly and long for the hand of God's correction, and to reach out and willingly grasp that correction, and criticism, and guidance when it appears, even if sometimes we don't like what God has to say.

This is probably where Paul's "thorn in the flesh" comes into focus. (See 2cor. 12:7) We all have one or more of these, you know- something that faithfully reminds us how very far from perfect, or beautiful, or brilliant we are. It is in recognizing and living with these weaknesses that the Christian man or woman builds their witness. The ultimate model of strength and victory through apparent weakness and defeat is the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Our Lord. But you and I are participants in this exercise every time we recognize and confront the weaknesses which render us humble. It is, you see in crucifying our pride on a daily basis, in confessing over-and-over-again the vital Lordship of the Savior over our lives that we live into the victory of the redeemed. Maybe this is part of what Paul meant in Romans, Galatians, and Colossians when he said repeatedly that you and I continue to participate in Jesus' death so that we may share in His life. (See Rom.6:4; Gal. 2:20; Col.2:13, 3:1)

The key to living this life of the redeemed seems to be encompassed in the great commandments of loving God completely and loving others as we love ourselves. They form the basis of the Collect for today, an ancient prayer from the *Leonine Sacramentary*, prayers used by Christians as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> But the Collect reminds us that it is only by the grace of the Holy Spirit that we are able to truly be devoted to God with our whole heart and united to each other in pure affection.

Where there is a will, there is a way - but it must be God's will in the end. You've all heard that we need to let go and let God. But maybe, another way to say this is that in order to let God, we need to let go - let go of our deeply ingrained sense of self-worth. We need to become the humble men and women that can look truth full in the face, and admit all of our own unworthiness, so that we can accept with a sense of childlike wonder the correction and reform that God's loving hand of grace longs to give. Then, yes, it is possible. It is indeed possible to start loving ourselves again. Once we realize, through our repentance and forgiveness, just how greatly he loves us.

JWB+, 6-29-18

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<sup>1</sup> (See Hatchett's *Commentary on the Prayer Book*, p. 188)