

Kingship (Deut. 17:14-20)

Leaders make a difference. I have seen good leaders. Unsurprisingly to you, many of the good leaders I know came from my time with Chick-fil-A. At my home church, I experienced the life-giving leadership of Jimmy, my first youth minister. Good leaders give us a larger vision, help us do our best work, and give us a sense of connection between what we are doing now and the results we will experience in the future. Max DePree defines the art of leadership as “**liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible.**” That quote will help us out in our study today. I have also seen bad leaders. These have often been the “managers” from my time working for an hourly wage – folks I encountered at the movie theatre or pizza restaurant where I worked. They give little guidance, instilled little hope, and made everything feel silly and purposeless. But let us forgive those we know like this. The truth is that they have often lacked the experience of good leadership themselves and simply replicated the experience.

What of our own national crisis? Some of you have heard me say that very few leaders seem to be showing up right now. Few seem to be casting a bigger vision, a more “liberating” or “humane” way of dealing with our problems. Our so-called leaders seem unwilling or unable to articulate anything other than severely truncated visions of human life. The answers we are being given at almost all levels of authority lack creativity and often pander to some of our worst impulses. And, of course, we know that bad leaders are a scourge upon a people. As the much-quoted Proverbs 29:18 begins, “**Where there is no vision, the people perish.**” Instinctively, we know this to be true.

Fewer of us remember the final half of that verse, however. The verse concludes, “**...but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.**” In this we see the Hebrew preference for parallelism. Happiness is contrasted with perishing. More to our point today, keeping the law of God is contrasted with having no vision. In the fullest, most liberating, most humane versions of leadership, the

vision which is given is responsive to and responsible before the law of God. We should not be surprised. King Jesus shouts “Mine!” over the life of leaders even as he does so over every other square inch of creation.

As the people contemplated life in the land, Moses spoke to them of the kind of liberating leadership they would need. During Deuteronomy, he talked about judges, priests, prophets, and, in our text today, kings. According to his reckoning, **the king they were to have in the future would be a person whose vision for the people was saturated in the word of God.** The king was supposed to make a personal copy of Deuteronomy, officially vetted by the priests. He was then to read from this copy of the law every day of his life, bringing this result: “...that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel” (17:20).

We might analyze Moses’s words on kings through the lens of our **four categories.** First, we see that the king is to lead the people in their claiming of the **inheritance.** No foreigner may reign over the people for God has given the land to the Israelites. The king is to be uniquely God’s man to lead the people in their fulfillment of the Abrahamic vocation to bless all the nations of the earth. Second, this king is to steadfastly refuse **idolatry.** For one in such a position, the chief means for falling into idolatry would be falling into traps of power and politics. The king is not to collect wives. This is not just a call to tame physical desires but a call to resist making political alliances through marriage and making religious alliances by permitting the worship of foreign gods in Israel. Marriage with many women could lead the heart of the king to be turned away (v. 17). So also, the king is not to collect horses and make alliances with Egypt. Nor is he to collect silver and gold. All such activities could also lead to the watering down of faithfulness to the Lord. Instead, the king is to stoke desire for the one true God through immersion in God’s word. Third, these commands give us a way to **interpret** the history of kingship in Israel. We can see how the kings which emerged in time fell short of these standards and threatened the inheritance of the people. Fourth, we take note of the encouraging and **inspirational** words of the text. Three thousand years later we still see the need for leaders to be humble and principle-centered.

Almost four hundred years after Moses spoke these words, kingship began in Israel. Kingship as a concept had a long history in the ancient Near East. The Sumerians had believed that kingship had descended from the heavens thousands of years earlier as city-states developed in Mesopotamia. The first request for a king happened when the people came to the prophet Samuel and asked that he “appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). But everything was helter-skelter and the leader that emerged was not a word-driven, liberating, humane leader. God granted the request of the people. We find, however, in Samuel’s account that the request of the people was **a sinful and rebellious request**. Why? Hadn’t God permitted the people a king in Deuteronomy 17? The problem was the motive of the people when they asked. They were not interested in doing things God’s way as it was laid out by Moses. Instead, they wanted to fit in with the nations. They had never properly submitted themselves to the Lord. Therefore, the settlement in Canaan had been full of constant conflict during the time of the judges. This is God’s evaluation in 1 Sam. 8:7-8: “And 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. According 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.”

The king that was chosen was Saul of Benjamin. His reign turned out to be a disaster; yet **God turned the unfaithfulness of the people and the king towards his own ends**. For after the failure of Saul, God called Samuel to anoint David as a man after his own heart. And God would eventually make a covenant with David to permanently give his descendants the throne of Israel. Yet even knowing this, the Davidic kings consistently failed in their faithfulness to the vision for kingship established in Deut. 17. We need look no further than David’s son Solomon to see what havoc can be produced by the acquiring of many wives and the making of many political alliances with the nations. Eventually, things got so bad that even good kings failed to make a copy of Deuteronomy. During the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century, the book was rediscovered, sending shockwaves through Josiah’s own heart and reforms throughout the nations. But even with this late revival, Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. The Davidic kings were unable to lead the people in the fulfillment of their God-given mission.

And so, the hope for a real leader – a Messiah from the family of David – lingered on. And finally, there arose **a king from the line of David who would do what all the other kings had failed to do**. The Bible reveals that Jesus is not only the faithful king of Israel who fulfilled the words of Moses, but he is the king of all creation. In Revelation, we get a glimpse of his heavenly throne room: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9-10).

Where does that leave us? We too stand in a season of transition, wanting to know something of the inheritance which the Lord has for us. God has promised each of us a place in his new heaven and new earth and a foretaste of this heavenly life right now. Two applications come to mind.

1. **Our priority is submission to King Jesus.** In Deuteronomy, it was incumbent upon the people to submit to and give honor to a king who fulfills the terms of Deut. 17. To disobey this humble, word-saturated kind of ruler would clearly be to disobey God himself. We must submit to Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the only way to the Father.
2. **Our own leadership must reflect the leadership of Jesus.** In whatever you are called to do, you will find a blueprint in Deut. 17. Are you humble? Are you grounded in God’s word? Do you lead by principle instead of whim? Are you striving to play by God’s rules and not the rules of the world? These are all elements of leadership in the way of Christ.

Our world stands in **crying need of leaders**. Principle-driven vision-casters who are responsive to God. Leaders who liberate and point us in the direction of a deeper fulfillment of the God-given vocation to be image-bearers. You and I may lament the loss of leadership today. But there is a better option. We might simply rise – under the leadership of God’s Spirit – and be better leaders in the places in which God has placed us. It starts with you and I, right where we are.