

**“Responding to Our Adversaries”**  
**1 Samuel 24**  
**October 20, 2019**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service**  
*Pr. Nicoletti*

We return this evening to First Samuel, after a few weeks away. Tonight, we will look at chapter twenty-four.

Saul continues to reign as king in Israel. David has been anointed as the next king. Though David has done Saul no harm, still, Saul has turned against David and now David is on the run.

In that context we come now to First Samuel twenty-four.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

<sup>24:1</sup> When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, “Behold, David is in the wilderness of Engedi.” <sup>2</sup> Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the Wildgoats’ Rocks. <sup>3</sup> And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave, and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave. <sup>4</sup> And the men of David said to him, “Here is the day of which Yahweh said to you, ‘Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you.’” Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. <sup>5</sup> And afterward David’s heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. <sup>6</sup> He said to his men, “Yahweh forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, Yahweh’s anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is Yahweh’s anointed.” <sup>7</sup> So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul. And Saul rose up and left the cave and went on his way.

<sup>8</sup> Afterward David also arose and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, “My lord the king!” And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth and paid homage. <sup>9</sup> And David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of men who say, ‘Behold, David seeks your harm?’” <sup>10</sup> Behold, this day your eyes have seen how Yahweh gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is Yahweh’s anointed.’ <sup>11</sup> See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. <sup>12</sup> May Yahweh judge between me and you, may Yahweh avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you. <sup>13</sup> As the proverb of the ancients says, ‘Out of the wicked comes wickedness.’ But my hand shall not be against you. <sup>14</sup> After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog! After a flea! <sup>15</sup> May Yahweh therefore be judge and give sentence between me and you, and see to it and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand.”

<sup>16</sup> As soon as David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, “Is this your voice, my son David?” And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. <sup>17</sup> He said to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. <sup>18</sup> And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when Yahweh put me into your hands. <sup>19</sup> For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may Yahweh reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. <sup>20</sup> And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. <sup>21</sup> Swear to me therefore by Yahweh that you will not cut off my offspring after me,

and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house.”<sup>22</sup> And David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let's pray ...

Lord, your word is a lamp to our feet  
and a light to our path.  
And we, as your people, have committed ourselves  
to keep your righteous commandments.  
In the trials we face,  
we ask you, Lord, to give us life according to your word.  
As you have accepted our praises today,  
so now teach us the way you would have us to go.  
Your testimonies are our heritage forever,  
for they are the joy of our hearts.  
Incline our hearts to perform your statutes  
forever, to the end.  
This we ask in Jesus's name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:105-108, 111-112]

Chapters twenty-four through twenty-six of First Samuel present us with three stories in which David is mistreated by an adversary, and then needs to decide how he will respond.

Now David has of course had a number of adversarial encounters with Saul up to this point, in which Saul unjustly pursued and threatened, and even tried to kill David. That is not new, really.

What *is* new is that in these encounters now, David will have an unprecedented opportunity to strike back at Saul. The question these chapters will present is: When those who have mistreated David are vulnerable, what will David do?

And what we see in our text tonight – in First Samuel twenty-four – is that David is tempted to treat Saul just a Saul has treated him.

And this comes up right in verse four.

Saul is again pursuing David. David is on the run. David and his men are hiding in a cave. And by God's providence, it is *that* very cave which Saul stops off at, in order to relieve himself – to go to the toilet.

And we need to appreciate that this is a striking providence which leaves Saul especially vulnerable. First of all, he is vulnerable because he has pulled away from his men. Saul is traveling with three thousand of his best soldiers – three thousand “chosen men.” Ordinarily, Saul is very well protected. But now he has pulled away from his men and entered this cave alone.

And not only that, he's relieving himself. He's not exactly in a position of being ready for an attack – his guard is down. He is extremely vulnerable, and he is so in the exact cave where both David and his men are present.

David is in control of the situation. David must decide what to do with Saul.

And as he is in that situation, he is immediately tempted to treat Saul the way Saul has treated him – he is immediately tempted to treat his enemy the way his enemy has treated him.

Because in verse four his men say to him “Here is the day of which Yahweh said to you, ‘Behold, I will give you your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you.’”

We should note a few things about the men’s words.

First, “do to him as it shall seem good to you” is a euphemism for “kill him.” Maybe that’s obvious – but it helps to state plainly what these men are saying. They are saying that Yahweh has given Saul into David’s hands so he can kill him.

Second, we have no record of Yahweh, of the Lord, ever saying these words to David about Saul. While Yahweh has generally said that he would give David’s enemies into his hands, he has not promised that he would give *Saul* into David’s hand or that when he does David should kill him.

Third, we should notice how similar the men’s words are to Saul’s words just a couple chapters earlier.

In First Samuel twenty-two, David came to rescue the people of Keilah. And doing that made him vulnerable. And Saul noticed this. And in First Samuel 22:7 Saul said about David “God has given him into my hand.” When Saul saw that David was vulnerable, his *assumption* was that God must be handing David over to Saul so that Saul could kill him. “God has given him into my hand.”

And now, two chapters later, David’s men tell David that God has given Saul into his hand, to kill him.

The men are tempting David to think like Saul, and to believe that when he sees Saul vulnerable, he should *assume* that God must be handing Saul over to David so that David could kill him.

In verse four, David is tempted by his men to think like Saul. And so, he is tempted to treat Saul the same way that Saul has treated him.

And of course, as this pattern emerges, we all can recognize that this was not a temptation that was unique to David.

We too are tempted, in a range of situations, to treat others – especially our adversaries – the same way that they treat us.

We can see this in our culture, we can see this in the church, we can see this in our families – we can see this in our interactions with non-Christians. We are often tempted to treat others the same way that they treat us.

Consider, for example, our interactions in our culture.

I touched on this briefly this morning, but as our culture fractures more and more into new forms of tribalism, we find ourselves increasingly tempted to treat our political and cultural opponents the same way they treat us.

We see this almost comically on a large scale in the political world. Each side slings mud, each side speaks in hateful and misleading ways, each side resorts to all kinds of unfair attacks, and if they are ever confronted about this, they immediately point to how their opponent has done the same thing to them. The rationale is made clear: “They did it to me, so of course I should do it back to them.” They embrace the idea that they should treat others as others have treated them.

But it happens on the level of ordinary people as well. On social media, or in one-on-one discussions, listen to how people – to how *Christians* – speak of those in power that they disagree with. They mock, and degrade them, and share unsubstantiated claims, and slander them. They break the ninth commandment in all sorts of ways. And they usually feel justified about it ... because their political opponents are doing it to the leaders *they* support, so they feel entitled to do it to their opponents’ favored leaders. In our culture and politics, we are constantly tempted to treat our opponents as they treat us.

But it’s not limited to politics – we do the same thing in the Church. We do the same thing in our relationships to other Christians. Sometimes it happens in the way we speak about Christians from another denominational tribe. We are quick to believe that another group is heretical or on a slippery slope to some kind of disaster, and we feel justified in telling others that that’s the case whether we’ve really researched it or not, because we assume that that’s how the other tribe would treat us.

But beyond those kind of divides, we are tempted to do it in our personal relationships with other Christians as well. If we feel snubbed by another Christian, we feel justified in snubbing them. If we suspect another Christian has gossiped about us, we feel justified in gossiping about them. If we feel judged by another Christian, we feel at liberty to judge them. Where do you see that you have been tempted to treat your brothers and sisters in Christ the same way they have treated (or mistreated) you?

It happens in our culture. It happens in the Church. But it also happens ... maybe it especially happens ... in our families.

In some cases, it’s wildly transparent. Young kids are especially bad at camouflaging their sin. And so, a parent can walk into a room to see one child hit another. We can declare that the child who hit is now in trouble, but then what, more often than not, is the first thing they say to us? “But they hit me first.”

The assumption is: I can treat others however they have treated me.

Husband and wife are often more subtle in their self-justification, but in every marriage that pattern shows up to a lesser or greater degree.

One spouse feels justified in ignoring, or withdrawing from, or losing their temper with, or insulting, or disparaging the other one, because they feel the other one has ignored, or withdrawn from, or lost their temper with, or insulted, or disparaged them. We are tempted to treat our spouse the same way they have treated us.

We see it in our culture, in the Church, in our families, and we see it in our interactions with non-Christians as well. When a non-Christian disrespectfully treats us as stupid for what we believe, we are tempted to find a way to subtly (but often just as disrespectfully) imply that *they* are stupid. When they accuse us of being hypocrites, we long to find a way to show how they are hypocrites. When they insultingly imply that we don't really care about other people, we want to find a way to insultingly point out that they don't really care about other people. Even with those we love, even with those we are trying to witness to, we are frequently tempted to treat non-Christian friends and acquaintances the way that they treat us.

In a whole range of settings, we see that we face the same dilemma that David does. We are tempted to treat others the same way that they treat us. We are tempted to act towards our adversaries as they have acted towards us.

Where do you see that most clearly in your life?

This is the problem that David faced. This is the problem that we face.

But our text tonight shows us that we need not give in to that temptation. In fact, our text tonight tells us that we *must not* give in to that temptation.

What we learn instead from David is that because God is sovereign, we are called to give others the honor due to their status, to boldly confront others with the truth they need to hear, and to entrust ourselves to Yahweh, while taking wise steps to protect ourselves and others.

Let me say that again. David in this chapter shows us that because God, because Yahweh, is sovereign, we are called to do three things. We are called first to give others the honor due to their status. We are called second to boldly speak to others the truth they need to hear. And we are called third to entrust ourselves to God, while taking wise steps to protect ourselves and others.

Now, we need to take note that at the root of all David does is a conviction that Yahweh, that God, is in control – that he is sovereign.

David will disagree with the conclusion of his men that Yahweh is calling him to strike Saul, but he has no doubt that Yahweh was sovereign over bringing Saul to his cave. He says so in verse ten. He knew that Yahweh was in control of all things, and he declares it again in verse twelve. The Lord is sovereign. And David's conviction of that truth leads David to the three things that follow.

The first of those things that we see, is that the conviction that God is sovereign leads David to give to Saul the honor due to his status.

We see this first in David's remorse regarding cutting Saul's robe.

Verse five can strike us as odd. David cuts off the corner of Saul's robe rather than killing him. And then we read in verse five: "Afterward David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul's robe." Now, what is going on here?

Well, in Israel and in the cultures surrounding it, a king's robe was a symbol of his authority [Leithart, 135; Alter, 148; Davis, 246-247] – and the fringe of the robe, from which David had cut, may have especially been a symbol of the king's authority [Firth, 257].

In other words, David's act of cutting the robe was a symbolic act that dishonored Saul's status and authority – and David was convicted of that and repented of it.

Now ... David's conviction might seem like an overreaction to us ... but we can see parallels in our culture as well.

If a man who has worked hard to serve and honor his country, in an act of frustration intentionally burns the flag of his country, he might afterwards be convicted in his heart. If a Christian who loves the Lord spits on the Bible, she will afterwards be convicted in her soul. If a husband who loves his wife throws his wedding ring into the ocean in anger, he will afterwards be grieved over such an act. And in the same way, David, who has worked so hard to honor Saul's kingship, has now vandalized the symbol of that kingship, and in response his heart strikes him.

And it is David's conviction over this act that shows his desire, and then his decision, to give to Saul the honor due to his status. And then he continues to give him that honor throughout the rest of the chapter.

In verse six he reaffirms to his men that Saul is Yahweh's anointed. In verse eight he addresses Saul as "My lord the king" and he bows to the ground before him. In verse eleven he refers to Saul as "my father." In verse fourteen he declares that Saul's status is well above his own.

Saul has not acted in a way to deserve any of this honor. But David believes that Yahweh is sovereign. And Yahweh in his sovereignty has placed Saul in a position of honor. And so, David gives him that honor.

Second, we see that the conviction that God is sovereign leads David to confront Saul with the truth that he needs to hear.

That is what we see in verses eleven through thirteen. David confronts Saul. But it's important for us to see that David does this for *Saul's* sake ... not for his own sake. The safest thing for David to do would be to remain in the cave until Saul and his men have left. David does not come out and speak truth to Saul out of self-interest – he does it in an attempt to help Saul.

Because David knows that Saul is not the highest authority ... but that there is one over him. Yahweh, the Lord, reigns above Saul. And Saul's actions have set him at odds with Yahweh. And judgment is coming. And so, David puts himself at risk, he steps out into danger, in order to lovingly but firmly confront Saul with his sin, that Saul might repent. And David does not sugarcoat his words. As respectful as he is, David still defends his innocence, and openly declares that Saul is in the wrong. He does this in the hopes that Saul might see the truth and repent.

Because Yahweh is Sovereign, because he is over all, including Saul, David boldly confronts Saul with the truth that Saul needs to hear, in the hope that Saul might repent.

Third, we see that the conviction that God is sovereign leads David to entrust himself to God, even while taking wise steps to protect himself and others.

In verse twelve David affirms again that he will not strike Saul, but that he will entrust himself to Yahweh. He will trust the Lord to judge between them and he will trust the Lord to do what is right with each of them.

David entrusts himself to the Lord ... but even as he does so, he still acts cautiously and wisely. When Saul admits that David is in the right and that he is in the wrong, David does not respond by going home to the king's court with Saul. Saul goes home. But we read in verse twenty-two that David returned to the stronghold. David entrusted himself to the Lord, while also taking wise steps to protect himself, to protect his followers, and to keep Saul from sinning against him further.

David has done all of these things, and Saul received them from him. Saul did not deserve to be treated as well as David treated him. But David did it not because Saul deserved it, but because God had called him to it.

And we are called to be like David.

But before we consider how we are to treat others like David does here, we need to recognize first how we have *already* been treated like Saul is treated here. We have been the recipients of undeserved honor and truth just as Saul is here.

Because in the actions of David in our text this evening we get, as is often the case, something of a picture of Jesus Christ – David's descendant and our Lord.

For as Saul rejected and raged against David the King, so we – and all humanity as a whole – have raged in our sin against the kingship of Christ, the Anointed One.

And as David had the opportunity to put Saul to the end that he deserved for the evil he had done ... but instead stayed his hand ... so Christ has done with us.

Every Christian has, like Saul, been confronted by Christ – been informed that Christ the King *could* have put an end to him ... but spared him. Every Christian has been confronted with the truth and called on to repent.

On one level such an interaction is the beginning of each of our Christian lives – whether we remember it or not. On another level we go through such an interaction every week when we confess our sins together ... and every day as we come to the Lord on our own. Again, and again Christ spares us – not because we deserve it but because of our status by faith as sons and daughters of God the Father. Again, and again he confronts us with the truth – and calls us to repent. Again, and again he vows to care for us far better than we deserve.

But while David's actions toward Saul were external and brought no lasting change in Saul's heart, Christ works in every Christian's heart by the Holy Spirit, bringing about a repentance Saul did not lay hold of.

Each one of us has been Saul in this story. We have been spared. We have been confronted. We have been called to repent.

We have each been like Saul ... and then, by God's grace, we are each called to be like David. We are called not to treat others as they have treated us, but to treat others as Christ our king has treated us.

Because we have been shown such grace, we are to follow in the footsteps of Christ. And so, because God is gracious and sovereign, we are called to give others the honor due to their status, to boldly confront others with the truth they need to hear, and to entrust ourselves to the Lord, while taking wise steps to protect ourselves and others.

What might that look like in our lives?

Well, in terms of our culture, we should recognize that the Bible calls on Christians to be strange political animals. We are to be a group that honors those in authority while speaking truth to them. That means we continue to honor our leaders even when they oppose us – even when they act like Sauls. But it also means that we continue to speak truth about them and to them, even if they are part of our political tribe. And the reason we are able to do this is because, while politics do matter, we also know that ultimately our hope is in the Lord who is sovereign, and not in politics. And so, in obedience to our Sovereign Lord, we do not, for the sake of political expediency, sacrifice the call to honor those above us, or the call to speak truth to them.

And if that is so in our culture, it is even more important in our interactions in the Church and with other Christians. There too we are called to give to each person the honor due to their status, and within the Church the most important status each person has is that of a child of God – of our brother or sister in Christ. Which means that whatever frustration a fellow Christian has caused for us, whatever they may have done to snub or offend us, however they might have broken our trust even, our call is to treat them as children of the King – to honor them as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But that does not mean we revert to formal or superficial relationships of extra politeness. It actually means we have a greater obligation to lovingly speak truth to one another, because we want to see each person live out their life rightly before their heavenly Father. It means we respond to other Christians' sin not with scorn or gossip or denouncement – but that we feel the weight of our calling to speak the truth they need to hear in love.

And it means that as we do that, we entrust them, and our relationship with them, to the Lord, while also taking wise steps ourselves. On the one hand, we know that it is the Lord who must work in their hearts, even as we seek to minister to them. But along with that, while we might make ourselves vulnerable in this process, we are not called on to act foolishly. We are called to use wisdom. We are not called to leave ourselves foolishly open to be sinned against, both to our hurt and to the hurt of the one sinning. When responding to another Christian's sin, we honor the other person in Christ, we speak truth for their good, and we use wisdom to determine how to make ourselves vulnerable, and how to protect ourselves as David does in his stronghold.

And as we follow that pattern in the family and household of God, so we are to follow it in our own families. Family relationships accrue a lot of history and a lot of baggage. And things can get complicated. This text is not a complete roadmap to deal with such things. But it reminds us of some important truths.

First, is that we are called to honor the members of our families in the roles that God has placed them for us. Husbands, your wife is the wife that God has given to you. Yes, she has faults. But whatever they may be, she is your wife, and you are to honor her as such. Wives, your husband is the husband the Lord has given to you. He has faults. But you are to honor him as your husband. And the same is true of every other family relationship – parents, children, siblings, and more. These are the people God has given you. You are to honor them as a gift from God.

And part of how you do that is with your words. With words intended to heal. With words that speak truth out of love, not out of spite. With words that seek to heal as David does – not to wound.

And we are to honor one another and speak truth to one another all in reliance on the Lord, lifting one another up in prayer.

And as we do that, we are called to be wise. And that means taking steps to prevent a family member from sinning against us. That might take many forms, from agreed upon guidelines to help one another, to bringing in help from outside the family. And cases of abuse are obvious examples of when outside intervention is needed to protect the vulnerable and keep others from committing further sin against them.

David gives us a pattern in our culture, in the Church, in our families. And he also gives us a pattern for our relationships with non-Christians.

James 3:9 reminds us that because all people are made in the likeness of God, they all deserve a level of honor and dignity from us. Whether they are a Christian or not, every human being bears God's image, and because of that status that they hold, we owe them honor. Even if their actions, even if their beliefs, even if their conduct towards us, is unworthy of honor, God calls on us to honor them in the status he has put them as his image bearers – just as David honored Saul.

And as we honor them, we are to call on them to live in a way consistent with the image they bear. As David called on Saul to live as Yahweh's anointed, so we are to call on all people to live as God's image-bearers – to turn to and follow God.

And as we do, we entrust them to the Lord, and are wise to guard ourselves and others. Jesus said in Matthew 10:6 that he sends us out like sheep among wolves, and so we are called to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

In our culture, in the Church, in our families, in our interactions with others in the world, our text tonight reminds us that because God is sovereign, we are called to give others the honor due to their status, to boldly confront others with the truth they need to hear, and to entrust both them and ourselves to the Lord, while taking wise steps to protect ourselves and others.

What relationship do you most need to pursue that in? Where do you most need to follow in the footsteps of David?

When David does all of this in response to Saul, we see Saul's response in verse seventeen. Saul says to David "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil." From there he goes on to acknowledge that he knows that David will rightfully be king after him.

There are a few things to note in Saul's response.

First, David's interaction with Saul is something of a success, even though David does not handle it *perfectly*, and even though Saul seems to know David didn't handle it perfectly. David may have sinned in some way by his act against Saul's robe, but nonetheless he handles the situation well overall. Some point out that the phrase Saul chooses in verse seventeen – "You are more righteous than I," may be an allusion to Judah's words to Tamar in Genesis 38. If that's right, then Saul is likely implying that neither of them have acted perfectly, though David has been far more righteous than he has. [Firth, 260]

That is a helpful reminder that even when we do not follow in Christ's footsteps perfectly, God can still work through us, just as he does here.

Second, Saul's response is a reminder that our conduct does preach to those we interact with. David's conduct pointed Saul to the truth of the God who was behind David, and what that God was doing. And so it may be with us.

Third, the end of our text is a reminder that we cannot control the outcome. David handled the situation well in the end. Better than most of us would have. But still, Saul's repentance will only be temporary. We cannot control the outcomes of such interactions. Some adversaries may remain adversaries. Fellow Christians or family members may remain hard-hearted towards us. We cannot control those outcomes any more than David could with Saul.

But fourth and finally, that reminds us that *that* is not the ultimate reason why David did what he did. David's ultimate purpose was not actually about Saul. It was about Yahweh. It was about the Lord. And even if Saul returned to his sin, Yahweh had still been honored in David's conduct. And that was more important than anything else to David – that he love and serve and honor the Lord who had poured out such undeserved blessings onto him.

And so for us. We should long to see relationships repaired, fellowship restored, and people brought to faith. But at the end of the day, such outcomes are outside of our control. What *is* in our control is whether the Lord is showed forth and glorified in our conduct.

And since he has shown such grace, and love, and truth to us – even when we were enemies, let us desire to honor our Lord, by reflecting his grace, and love, and truth in the way we treat those around us.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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- Leithart, Peter J. *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.