

“Identifying Our True Helper”
1 Samuel 26
November 24, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
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Our text this evening is from First Samuel, chapter twenty-six. It is the third of three episodes, told one after the other, in which David is mistreated by someone whom he has served faithfully, David is then given a chance to strike back at the one who has mistreated him, and then finally, by the end of each incident, David chooses not to strike, but to trust the Lord.

In chapter twenty-four Saul comes after David in the wilderness of Engedi. In chapter twenty-five Nabal slanders and dishonors David in Carmel. And now, in chapter twenty-six, Saul once more comes back against David in the wilderness of Ziph.

And this incident in chapter twenty-six has a number of similarities with what happened in chapter twenty-four, along with some very important differences, which we will focus on tonight.

In both chapter twenty-four and twenty-five we looked almost exclusively at the temptations that David faced, and the challenges he presents to us.

Tonight, though, we will begin by considering the path of Saul before we turn to the path of David – returning to a pattern of two paths which the interactions between David and Saul so often seem to hold out before us.

With that in mind, we now turn to First Samuel chapter twenty-six.

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

^{26:1} Then the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, “Is not David hiding himself on the hill of Hachilah, which is on the east of Jeshimon?” ² So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand chosen men of Israel to seek David in the wilderness of Ziph. ³ And Saul encamped on the hill of Hachilah, which is beside the road on the east of Jeshimon. But David remained in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, ⁴ David sent out spies and learned that Saul had indeed come. ⁵ Then David rose and came to the place where Saul had encamped. And David saw the place where Saul lay, with Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army. Saul was lying within the encampment, while the army was encamped around him.

⁶ Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai the son of Zeruah, “Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?” And Abishai said, “I will go down with you.” ⁷ So David and Abishai went to the army by night. And there lay Saul sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head, and Abner and the army lay around him. ⁸ Then Abishai said to David, “God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice.” ⁹ But David said to Abishai, “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD's [against Yahweh’s] anointed and be guiltless?” ¹⁰ And David said, “As Yahweh lives, Yahweh will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. ¹¹ Yahweh forbid that I should put out my hand against Yahweh's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head and the jar of water, and let us go.” ¹² So David took the spear and the

jar of water from Saul's head, and they went away. No man saw it or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from Yahweh had fallen upon them.

¹³ Then David went over to the other side and stood far off on the top of the hill, with a great space between them. ¹⁴ And David called to the army, and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Will you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner answered, "Who are you who calls to the king?" ¹⁵ And David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord. ¹⁶ This thing that you have done is not good. As Yahweh lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, Yahweh's anointed. And now see where the king's spear is and the jar of water that was at his head."

¹⁷ Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord, O king." ¹⁸ And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands?" ¹⁹ Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is Yahweh who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before Yahweh, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of Yahweh, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' ²⁰ Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth away from the presence of Yahweh, for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains."

²¹ Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake." ²² And David answered and said, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and take it. ²³ Yahweh rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for Yahweh gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against Yahweh's anointed. ²⁴ Behold, as your life was precious this day in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of Yahweh, and may he deliver me out of all tribulation." ²⁵ Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

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

Let's pray ...

Righteous are you, O Lord,
and righteous are your rules.
You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
Your promises are well tried,
and we, your servants, love them.
Though we be small and despised,
yet we do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is righteous forever,
and your word is true.
Even when we face trials,
your commandments are our delight.
Give us now understanding as we come to your word,
that we might here find life.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:137-138, 140-144]

Our text tonight begins with Saul, and we too will begin this evening by considering the pattern of Saul.

What we see from Saul in our text is that when we refuse to listen to or trust the Lord, then we increasingly lose our ability to discern who our helpers really are.

Saul's progression in his refusal to listen to God has been unfolding since chapter thirteen. God gave a command, and Saul ignored it. God confronted Saul through Samuel, the prophet, and Saul failed to truly repent. And Saul's rejection of the Lord's word and his refusal to trust the Lord has deepened over the thirteen chapters leading up to our text tonight. A number of sins and problems have grown out of this root rejection of God and God's word, and we see another one here in chapter twenty-six.

Saul has increasingly lost his ability to discern who his true helpers really are.

And for some context to grasp just how much Saul has lost his discernment, we should remember that Saul's last interaction with David, in chapter twenty-four, included Saul unjustly seeking to kill David, and David sparing Saul's life when he had the opportunity to strike back – just as he does here. And after that Saul declared that David was more righteous than he was, and confessed that David had done right and would one day be king.

Saul knew and declared that David was not his enemy. He had been given proof once again.

And so, why then, is Saul going after David again in chapter twenty-six?

Well, David holds out two possibilities in verse nineteen. He says either that Yahweh has stirred up Saul to attack David, or that men who should be cursed have stirred Saul up against David. And what we know from the rest of the chapter that it was indeed cursed men who had stirred Saul up to pursue David.

In verse one we read that it was in fact the Ziphites who first came to Saul and encouraged him to go after David.

And this is not the first time the Ziphites have done this. Back in chapter twenty-three the Ziphites did the same thing, and while we are not told *why* they were so set on betraying David to Saul, in the context it seemed most likely that they hoped to be rewarded by Saul for their betrayal. [Firth, 525; Alter, 144]

And it seems likely that the same thing is happening again here. What might have made it a tougher sell was that just two chapters earlier Saul had declared David righteous and let him go. We do not know the contents of the discussion between Saul, the Ziphites, and Saul's advisors ... but it's hard not to wonder if the Ziphites had made a case for going after David in order to convince Saul that what they had to offer him was valuable and deserved a reward. But we're not told what was said. In any case, Saul is stirred up by cursed men, as David says, and so pursues David.

The big picture of all of this is that Saul has decided again to treat David as an enemy. And he has decided to treat both the Ziphites and his advisors – which would include Abner and his closest men – as being trustworthy helpers.

And in what unfolds we see that Saul was wrong on all accounts.

First, the Ziphites prove to be a snare to Saul. Whatever their intentions may have been, while they come claiming to offer Saul an edge over his rival, they in fact lead him into a trap. It is the advice and direction of the Ziphites that lead Saul into a situation where David and Abishai are given a clear opportunity to kill Saul.

Second, Abner proves to be a false source of security for Saul. Abner, as the commander of Saul's army, would not only have likely been a trusted advisor to Saul (he was Saul's uncle and so would have been older than Saul and would have had more experience), but he was also charged with protecting Saul. Saul trusted Abner as a helper, and in what follows, Abner utterly fails Saul. [Leithart, 146]

Abner either failed to set a guard over Saul while he slept, or he set an incompetent guard ... because when David and Abishai enter the camp, everyone around Saul is asleep.

It's not mere bravado when David begins to call out to Saul's camp by confronting Abner and declaring that he deserves to die. David is really serious. And the "you" in verse sixteen is plural – so David is not only addressing Abner, but all those in the inner circle charged with protecting the king. [Alter, 165] David is saying that they all deserve to be court-martialed and executed for their failure of duty. [Davis, 273]

Saul trusts in the Ziphites, in Abner, and in his inner circle to be his helpers. And instead of helping him, they all lead him towards death.

And it's worth noting that there's no indication that any of them were aiming to do that. It wasn't that the Ziphites, Abner, or Saul's inner circle wanted anything bad to happen to Saul. It's more that they didn't care enough if it did. The Ziphites were so concerned with benefiting themselves from the situation with David that they failed to do enough reconnaissance to keep the king safe. Abner and the others may have had no ill-will towards the king, but it seems they did not care enough to make sure he was guarded well overnight. These men were not bad helpers because they wanted to harm Saul. They were bad helpers because they cared for themselves more than they did for him.

And as those Saul had trusted fail him, it is David who proves to be the one true helper to Saul.

David has served Saul and helped him again and again, and he adds to it even further here. Despite advice from Saul's subjects from Ziph, despite the advice and direction of Saul's commander Abner, despite three thousand of Saul's troops surrounding Saul, that night in the camp it was David and only David who saved Saul's life.

Abishai was ready to kill Saul. He had the opportunity. He had the desire. In other words, all Saul's soldiers and advisors had failed him. The man who would kill Saul stood over him. And in the end, it was David who stayed Abishai's hand. David was the only true helper to Saul in the camp.

Saul had misread every single one of those men. What we see in Saul is that when we refuse to listen to or trust the Lord, then we increasingly lose our ability to discern who our helpers really are.

And this can play out in a variety of ways in our own lives – both as we contend with spiritual forces, and earthly forces.

We might think of this struggle to discern who our helpers really are in terms of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

First, we could consider the flesh.

We might assume that if we are Christians then we know that our sins of the flesh are our enemies and not our friends ... and yet, in our heart we might not always act or feel that way.

Augustine, in his *Confessions* described his struggle with his sins as he approached conversion. He says that those sins, which had been with him for so long, still held him back and whispered in his ear: “Do you mean to get rid of us? Shall we never be your companions again after [this] moment ... never ... never again? From that time onward so-and-so will be forbidden to you, all your life long.” Augustine then turns to God and says: “And what was it that they were reminding me of by those words, ‘so-and-so,’ O my God, what were they bringing to my mind? May your mercy banish such memories far from me! What foul deeds were they not hinting at, what disgraceful exploits?” And yet, Augustine admits, habit still taunted him, saying to him: “Do you imagine that you will be able to live without these things?” [*Confessions*, VIII,11,26]

Our sins ... even sins that on one level we hate ... on another level ... in another corner of our heart ... we can still treat as our friends ... as our helpers ... as that thing that will get us through hard times ... as that thing that gives us relief ... we can even have a kind of affection for it.

What sin is like that in your life? What sin do you secretly cherish? What sin do you secretly treat as a helper? What sin do you worry you simply could not live without? Be honest with yourself.

And yet, as God’s word reminds us, such sins are no more friends to us than Abner or the Ziphites were to Saul. They lead us to a trap rather than to help. They leave us vulnerable rather than secure. They lead us, as they led Saul, to our death.

In Augustine’s case, it was returning to God’s word that banished the delusion that such sins were his helpers – that such sins were his friends. And because the converse of that is true as well, you and I can only begin to treat such sins as friends when our hearts are in some way distant from the Word of God.

That is true regarding sins of the flesh.

It is also true regarding sins of the devil – and particularly sins regarding suspicion, and cynicism, and distrust towards the Lord.

The root case of this would of course be our first parents, in the Garden, and the words of the devil they chose to believe. The devil said to them: Did God *really* say that? Will what God said *really* happen? Don’t you see that what’s *really* going on is that God is withholding something good from you?

The root sin of Adam and Eve involved distancing themselves from God’s word, and then trusting in a false helper – in the serpent.

And we can often follow in their footsteps. Struggles and wrestling with the Lord are to be expected. But that's not what the devil wants us to do. The devil wants us to be *suspicious* of the Lord. He wants us to be *cynical* towards the Lord.

And then he wants us to treat that suspicion and that cynicism as our friends – as our helpers. He wants us to believe that such companions make us wise, as we avoid trusting in the Lord too openheartedly or too naively.

He wants us to mis-identify such doubts as our friends, and treat the Lord as a suspect.

Where do you see this pattern in your life as well?

And finally, the failure to discern who our true helpers really are plays out in many ways in the world and in our relationships. We are prone to treat as friends those who promise to give us what we want at little or no cost, just as Saul was with the Ziphites ... and so we are quick to count as friends those who do not care at all for our wellbeing – whether they are peers, co-workers, advertisers, politicians, or others. We are easily duped by the self-centered, when they promise us what we want. But along with that, such failure to discern also depends on us wanting some things more than we should, which grows out of a distance from the word of the Lord.

Where do you see that in your life? Where do you see yourself trusting those you should not trust, all because you are more desperate for approval or acceptance or success than you are for the favor of the Lord?

When we refuse to listen to or trust the Lord, then we increasingly lose our ability to discern who our helpers really are.

And in a lot of ways, that progression – that cause and effect – makes sense ... doesn't it?

God, after all, is our greatest helper. He is the one who made us, and he reaches out to us in order to save us. There is no helper greater than he is.

And so, when we reject God, when we treat him as if he is not our helper – whether in a large overarching way, or in lots of little ways ... when we treat our greatest helper as if he is anything but that, then it should not be surprising when our perception of everyone else is distorted as well.

If we count the One who sent his Son for us, as if he were our enemy, then we have twisted our perception of who is our helper on a fundamental level. We can't expect to skew our vision so severely in one place and not have it twisted in many other places as well.

And so, as we fail to listen to and trust the Lord – as we fail to see and respond to him as our helper, then we also increasingly lose our ability to discern who our other helpers really are.

The root problem when we do this is between us and God. And so the root of the solution must be between us and God as well. And since God is our greatest helper, it should be no surprise that it is God who takes the initiative to call us out of our skewed perspective and destructive ways.

And we see that in our passage this evening. In verse twelve we are told that the Lord, that Yahweh, is at work. And the way we are told he is at work is that he caused a “deep sleep” to fall on Saul and the men. And the Hebrew word used there is a word with some important associations. It refers, as one commentator notes, to “more than just the slumber of the weary.” In Job 4:13 and 33:15 it is associated with the type of sleep “where Yahweh is claimed to reveal himself.” [Firth, 275, 277]

Much more significantly, in Genesis 15:12 the word is used to describe the kind of sleep that fell onto Abraham before the Lord revealed to him the blessings that he would bring on him, and the help that he would be to him.

And finally, the same word is used in Genesis 2:21, when the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, so that he might present to him a helper fit for him, in Eve. [Firth, 277]

Taken together, there is something striking about how God works towards Saul in First Samuel twenty-six.

Saul had rejected the Lord, and he had rejected David, the Lord’s anointed – the Lord’s servant.

And in this chapter God breaks into Saul’s life again to call him to repentance. He puts Saul to sleep like Adam, and like Adam he wakes him up to a revelation of who his true helper really is: David, the servant of Yahweh. Through David God calls Saul to repentance.

Sadly, Saul’s repentance will be superficial and fleeting. It will not be deep or persistent.

But even as we see Saul fail to lay hold of the grace offered to him, we must be sure we see and respond rightly to the same grace when it is offered to us.

Because God breaks into our lives as well, and calls us to repentance.

He does this in many ways, but he does it most of all through Jesus Christ, the greater David.

In some sense, we have in this episode a foreshadowing of Jesus’s earthly ministry. Jesus Christ, God the Son, came to a world that was set on killing him. As the Son of God, Jesus had the ability to strike at the heart of this world and destroy it for its evil, just as David had the opportunity with Saul. But like David, Jesus stayed his hand, and instead called our world to repentance.

And as he did for the world in his incarnation, so he does for each one of us now through his Spirit.

Jesus Christ sits on the throne of heaven where he rules. And he knows our hearts. He knows how we have failed to trust him. He knows how we have failed to obey him. He knows the murder and the tyranny in our hearts. And it would take nothing at all for him to destroy us. And we would deserve it.

But instead he stays his hand. And he calls out to us. And he urges us to repent.

He does it centrally in our conversion, but he does it over and over again in our Christian lives.

Do you see how every prayer of repentance, every time you come to God in his word, every time you sincerely kneel before the Lord on a Sunday morning for the prayer of confession – every single one of those is meant to be a rousing from your spiritual slumber, as the greater David calls out to you again from the mountain top, and points out to you that he has had every opportunity to strike you down for your unjust actions towards him ... but he has stayed his hand and instead desires to see you repent? Do you see how every call to confession and repentance is a realization again that Christ, whom we have so mistreated, is not our enemy but our truest helper?

Our call is to embrace that truth from the heart, again and again. To respond not with the superficial repentance of Saul that gets shallower every time, but with the sincere repentance of true faith that gets deeper every time.

Our call is to trust in Christ our Lord, the son of David, as our truest helper.

That is the central thing our text calls us to. But as is often the case, other things flow out from that.

Because as we are roused from our slumber by the greater David to faith and repentance, so we are to follow in the footprints of David as we live in obedience to our Lord.

And David here in First Samuel twenty-six gives us the alternative path to what we see in Saul.

What we see in David is that as we listen to and rely on the Lord, we can grow in discernment, and we can *be* a loving helper even to our enemies, while we trust in the justice of the Lord.

As we listen to and rely on the Lord, we can grow in discernment, and we can *be* a loving helper even to our enemies, while we trust in the justice of the Lord.

Where do we see that in David?

First, we should notice that David also has a false helper with him. He has Abishai the son of Zeruiah.

When David and Abishai arrive at Saul's bedside in the camp, Abishai says to David: "God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice."

Abishai presents himself as a helper to David in a number of ways here.

First, he remembers that David would not put out his hand against Saul himself back in chapter twenty-four, and suspecting that this is out of an over-sensitive conscience, Abishai offers to do it for him – to strike Saul for David, so that David's hands can remain clean. [Firth, 277]

Second, by mentioning two strikes with the spear, Abishai is subtly bringing up the two attempts Saul had already made on David's life with his spear, and so implying further rationale for striking Saul at this time. [Alter, 164; Leithart, 147]

Abishai presents himself to David as a helper ... but David sees through him, and restrains him. David has discernment. He says: "Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against

Yahweh's anointed and be guiltless? [...] As Yahweh lives, Yahweh will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. Yahweh forbid that I should put out my hand against Yahweh's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head and the jar of water, and let us go."

David can see the problem in Abishai's supposed help, because he trusts in Yahweh to deliver him.

David, trusting Yahweh's promise to bring him to the throne, and remembering what the Lord had done to Nabal, trusts that the Lord will act in justice and deal with Saul in his own timing. He trusts in the Lord's power. He trusts in the Lord's justice. And this trust is what enables David to see that Abishai is not a true helper to him, but a tempter.

Trusting the Lord, David not only can identify a false helper in his midst, but he can *be* a true helper himself, even to Saul – even to his enemy.

David is, as we've said, the one who actually saves Saul in this passage. When Abishai presents a threat, it is David who saves Saul, not Abner, Saul's soldiers, or the Ziphites. It is David.

We have here a picture of what Christ calls us to in the Sermon on the Mount, when he tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. [Matthew 5:44] That is what our Lord calls us to, and it is what we see David doing for Saul in our text. We are to be a help to and to love our enemies.

Of course, we should note that this help is not about letting other people just walk all over us, but it is meant to be a call to repentance. David confronts Saul in the verses that follow. And his confrontation is not at odds with his role as Saul's helper, but it grows out of it.

And in fact, David is able to help Saul because he believes in God's justice. David knows that the Lord will be just and that he will strike Saul down in his timing if Saul fails to repent. David also knows that the Lord will reward *him* for his faithfulness and kindness, as he says in verse twenty-three.

David's choice to be a loving helper of Saul is not a hopeless acceptance that nothing is going to change – it's not a weak submission to the wicked in power. David helps Saul because he knows that God is just, and God will judge. Those two things are actually inseparable.

Theologian Miroslav Volf has argued that the decision not to strike back at our enemies, but instead to love them, "requires a belief in divine vengeance." Volf acknowledges that such a claim will be unpopular in the West, where many people oppose the idea of God's judgment and vengeance. But, Volf says: "It takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from a belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die [...] [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind." [Quoted in Keller, 74]

Volf's point is that in order for us to love our unjust neighbors, in order for us to be a true help to our enemies, we must believe in God's justice – and that his justice will be carried out either on our enemies, should they refuse the call to repentance, or on Christ himself should they repent and accept his offer in the gospel. But in either case, a trust in God's justice is what enables us to be a true help to our enemies, just as David is to Saul here.

What we see in David is that as we listen to and rely on the Lord, we can grow in discernment, and we can *be* a loving helper even to our enemies, while we trust in the justice of the Lord.

But what does that look like?

Well, first, we must draw close to the Lord in order to see what is good and what is not, so that we can truly discern who is our helper and who is our enemy.

That means that at root we must rely on our truest and most faithful helper, the Lord. It means that, second, judging by God's standards and God's values and God's wisdom, we must discern who our true earthly helpers are as well. And then we must rely on those true helpers that the Lord has given us.

Finally, as we do that, we must then seek how we can be a help to those around us – not only to those who have helped us, but even to our earthly enemies.

To consider how you are to do that for your enemies, you must ask who those enemies are.

They may be those who seek to do you harm like Saul did to David. But they may also be those who entice you to evil as the Ziphites did to Saul or as Abishai did to David. Or they may be those who should do good to you, but fail to, as Abner did to Saul.

Whoever our enemies may be, David reminds us that we are to be a loving helper to our neighbors – even those who are set against us in one way or another.

Our temptation might be to do *harm* to our enemies – as Abishai recommends.

Our temptation might be to simply *avoid* our enemies – as David must have considered.

Our temptation might be to flatter our enemies, in the hope that they will relent.

We can be tempted to harm or to avoid or to flatter our enemies ... but David does none of those things.

Instead of harming Saul, David acts as a help, protecting him from Abishai.

Instead of avoiding Saul out of self-interest, David confronts Saul for Saul's own good.

And instead of flattering Saul out of fear, David challenges Saul over his actions, and urges him to repent.

Whom are you seeking to harm in your life? Whom are you seeking to avoid? Whom are you encouraging down a road to destruction through flattery?

Whom might the Lord be calling on you to help, to confront, and to challenge – out of love, not self-interest?

And following David's example, where do you need to more firmly believe in the Lord's justice in order to do such things: to remember that he will judge, so you don't have to, to remember that he will reward the righteous and so you should righteously love your enemies, to remember that his judgment is real and so you must warn those who are on a path to destruction?

Where is the Lord calling you to follow in the footprints of David?

We live in a world that is shot-through with confusion over who our true helpers are and who our true enemies are.

We live, in many ways, in a world of Sauls ... because we live in a world made up of sons of Adam and daughters of Eve – the first to so fundamentally confuse their truest helper and their truest enemy. We far too often resemble our first parents.

But the Lord, our helper, has broken into our world.

And so, let us draw close to him in trust and faith. As we do, let us ask him to open our eyes through his word, that we might discern our true helpers and our true enemies.

And then, let us walk not as children of Adam, but as children of God – as brothers and sisters of Christ our elder brother. Let us walk as those who help and serve those around us, just as David did, and just as our Lord did – loving our enemies, and trusting in God's justice rather than our own.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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