

LIFE OF DAVID 7

Duty

“He said to his men, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord.’”¹

Duty, outside of a military context, seems to be a word of the past. We should not be surprised by the decline of a sense of duty when tolerance and the

ideas of moral relativism prevail in our society. Duty is one’s sense of moral obligation or responsibility. If there are no absolute standards being observed by the culture, then a sense of duty is, at best, individualized, and, at worst, considered entirely unnecessary and outmoded.

For godly men, however, duty is not optional, but rather flows out of respect and reverence for our highest authority, God Himself. David admirably demonstrates the heart behind fulfilling one’s duty when he is faced, not once, but twice, with the opportunity to revenge himself by taking Saul’s life. Revenge is a subtle temptation, seemingly appealing to one’s sense of justice. In reality, though, it is a temptation to usurp God’s authority by taking matters into one’s own hands. God makes it very clear how He feels about revenge in Deuteronomy and then later in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”²

David is hiding in the wilderness with his 600 men and Saul is pursuing him with “three thousand able young men,” when Saul is required to stop to answer the call of nature.³ As the Lord would have it, Saul stops off in the very cave where David and his men are hiding. It seems like the perfect opportunity for David to take control and realize his God-given destiny. His men encourage him to act quickly and decisively, saying, “This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, ‘I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.’”⁴ Interestingly, we do not find evidence of that word ever being given by the Lord elsewhere in the accounts of David’s life.⁵ The men are giving David every reason to justify what he probably wants to do: finally get back at the man who has made his life nearly unlivable.

David’s response in the moment is surprising. He does sneak up on Saul, but rather than killing or even wounding him, he cuts off the corner of his robe. In our modern perspective, this action doesn’t seem like a big deal, so we are confused when the word says David was conscience-stricken because of his action. When we dig a little deeper, we learn that: this act was far from meaningless because David’s confiscation of a portion of the royal robe signified the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David. ...By voiding Saul’s claim to kingship, he was at some level lifting his hand against ‘the anointed of the Lord.’ This was more than an act against the king; it was rebellion against the Lord... who had previously punished Israelites who had expressed a rebellious attitude against constituted authority.⁶

Pre-Article Questions:

1. What areas of life do you have the greatest sense of responsibility or duty?
2. What character qualities does it take to fulfill our responsibilities and not leave things left undone?

1. 1 Samuel 24:6

2. Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19

3. 1 Samuel 24:2

4. 1 Samuel 24:4

5. The New American Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel. p. 238

6. Ibid p. 239

Although David recognizes that it is his moral obligation, his duty, not to kill Saul, his king, he has succumbed to temptation by symbolically taking matters into his own hands. He repents and persuades his men not to sin against Saul themselves and ends with an eloquent acknowledgement of Saul's position, renewed respect, and a passionate plea for reconciliation. Saul also acknowledges his own guilt, but true reconciliation is no longer feasible because of Saul's unpredictable favor and lack of commitment to God.

Only two chapters later, in 1 Samuel 26, we see David placed in a very similar situation. He is able to enter the camp of Saul undetected with the help of the Lord who put Saul and his men into a "deep sleep."⁷ Again, the companion David brought with him makes a convincing case for justifying any vengeful motives David might have. Abishai says, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands" and even offers to kill Saul himself.⁸ But David refuses to allow his emotions and his desire for revenge to conquer his reverence for God and his desire to walk righteously before Him. He rebukes Abishai and only allows him to take Saul's spear and water jug as a token of their presence (and restraint). David's actions corroborate his belief that "only God Himself has the right to take the life of ...a divinely sanctioned leader."⁹

In a world of relative morals and situational ethics, the idea of moral obligation or responsibility, particularly toward and unrighteous and unjust authority, seems laughable. However, God clearly commands his people to "be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which [He] has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."¹⁰ Therefore, we have the moral obligation, the responsibility, the duty, as men, to respect authority, whether it be on a state, national, local, or pastoral level. This respect does not mean passivity. David did not simply allow Saul to kill him, nor did he give up on God's promises. He spent time with the Lord, actively waiting and seeking His guidance, he trained his men both in warfare and in godly character, he prepared to fill the office for which God had appointed him, but he refused to take matters into his own hands, give in to the temptation to take revenge, and violate God's law. He was a man who did his duty and, in the end, God rewarded him for his faithfulness.

1 Samuel 24, NIV

After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." ² So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crag of the Wild Goats. ³ He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. ⁴ The men said, "This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe. ⁵ Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. ⁶ He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord." ⁷ With these words David sharply rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way. ⁸ Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. ⁹ He said to Saul, "Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you'? ¹⁰ This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my

7. 1 Samuel 26:12

8. 1 Samuel 26:8

9. The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel. p. 353

10. Romans 13:1

lord, because he is the Lord's anointed.' 11 See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. 12 May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. 13 As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you. 14 "Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea? 15 May the Lord be our judge and decide between us. May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand." 16 When David finished saying this, Saul asked, "Is that your voice, David my son?" And he wept aloud. 17 "You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. 18 You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the Lord delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. 19 When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May the Lord reward you well for the way you treated me today. 20 I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. 21 Now swear to me by the Lord that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family." 22 So David gave his oath to Saul. Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

1 Samuel 26, NIV

The Ziphites went to Saul at Gibeah and said, "Is not David hiding on the hill of Hakilah, which faces Jeshimon?" 2 So Saul went down to the Desert of Ziph, with his three thousand select Israelite troops, to search there for David. 3 Saul made his camp beside the road on the hill of Hakilah facing Jeshimon, but David stayed in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul had followed him there, 4 he sent out scouts and learned that Saul had definitely arrived. 5 Then David set out and went to the place where Saul had camped. He saw where Saul and Abner son of Ner, the commander of the army, had lain down. Saul was lying inside the camp, with the army encamped around him. 6 David then asked Ahimelek the Hittite and Abishai son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, "Who will go down into the camp with me to Saul?" "I'll go with you," said Abishai. 7 So David and Abishai went to the army by night, and there was Saul, lying asleep inside the camp with his spear stuck in the ground near his head. Abner and the soldiers were lying around him. 8 Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I won't strike him twice." 9 But David said to Abishai, "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? 10 As surely as the Lord lives," he said, "the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. 11 But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let's go." 12 So David took the spear and water jug near Saul's head, and they left. No one saw or knew about it, nor did anyone wake up. They were all sleeping, because the Lord had put them into a deep sleep. 13 Then David crossed over to the other side and stood on top of the hill some distance away; there was a wide space between them. 14 He called out to the army and to Abner son of Ner, "Aren't you going to answer me, Abner?" Abner replied, "Who are you who calls to the king?" 15 David said, "You're a man, aren't you? And who is like you in Israel? Why didn't you guard your lord the king? Someone came to destroy your lord the king. 16 What you have done is not good. As surely as the Lord lives, you and your men must die, because you

did not guard your master, the Lord's anointed. Look around you. Where are the king's spear and water jug that were near his head?" 17 Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is that your voice, David my son?" David replied, "Yes it is, my lord the king." 18 And he added, "Why is my lord pursuing his servant? What have I done, and what wrong am I guilty of? 19 Now let my lord the king listen to his servant's words. If the Lord has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, people have done it, may they be cursed before the Lord! They have driven me today from my share in the Lord's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the Lord. The king of Israel has come out to look for a flea—as one hunts a partridge in the mountains." 21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong." 22 "Here is the king's spear," David answered. "Let one of your young men come over and get it. 23 The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. 24 As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble." 25 Then Saul said to David, "May you be blessed, David my son; you will do great things and surely triumph." So David went on his way, and Saul returned home.

Scripture Questions:

1. Look at David's companions in 1 Samuel 24 and 26. What was their approach to God's command to respect and be subject to authority?
2. What was David's response immediately after cutting a corner from Saul's robe? Why do you think he reacted this way? How does this demonstrate his relationship with the Holy Spirit (John 16:8)?
3. In both chapters, Saul recognizes his own sin. What is the difference between Saul's response to his sin and David's response to his own sin?
4. What does Saul prophesy about David?

Application Questions:

1. When do you find it most challenging to respect authority? Read Romans 13:1-2. Does this change your perspective on those you find difficult to respect? How will knowing that God institutes every authority change your response?
2. In what areas in your life is God calling you to take responsibility or fulfill a moral obligation? How would that situation be affected if doing your duty was motivated by your respect and love for God?
3. Do you have friends that help you justify actions that satisfy your fleshly desires? What does this passage imply about the need to withstand peer pressure? How could David have justified taking action against Saul? Does God view sin comparatively? Why or why not? Thought: David was still conscience-stricken when he only cut off the corner of Saul's robe. He realized that that symbolic act was no less an act of rebellion against God than if he had actually struck Saul down. He also could have justified his actions by considering how much suffering Saul had caused him, but he refused to compare offenses.
4. How did David refuse to justify sinful impulses? In what ways can you take a stand and refuse to give into temptation? How can we help you to take that stand?
5. What is your absolute standard for right and wrong? How can you guard against letting moral relativism influence your response to your circumstances?

Prayer Partner Assignment:

Memory Verse: Romans 13:1, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Read 1 Samuel 24-26.

Please meet with your prayer partner from this week to discuss the following questions on the chapters assigned for this week:

1. What kind of justification did David's men give him for acting vengefully in chapter 24? Why is it significant that we never find this prophecy (at least applied to Saul) in Scripture?
2. How might the situation in chapter 25 have increased David's confidence in God's vindication and perfect timing?
3. What was the result of David's confidence in the Lord in chapter 26 as compared with the events of chapter 24?