

Title: Poor Leadership
Text: 1 Samuel 14:24-46
Theme: When “what seems good” to the leader is not good
Series: 1 Samuel
Prop Stmt: Poor leadership helps us long for the real King.

I used to have a cartoon that said, “How many were there? What did they look like? How fast were they going? What direction were they heading? I’ve got to find them. I’m their leader.” This sounds a bit like Saul, Israel’s first king in 1 Samuel 14. The Philistines have amassed near the strategic city of Michmash and appear to have Saul and his frightened band of soldiers trapped when Saul’s son, Jonathan and his armor-bearer slip away, attack a small garrison of 20 Philistine soldiers and defeat them. This amazing act of faith results in an earthquake that sends panic rippling through the Philistine army, which begins to attack itself in all of the confusion.

Hearing the battle raging, Saul has the priest begin to inquire of the Lord what is going on and what he should do. But Saul decides that he doesn’t have time to wait and decides to attack. Saul rallied his soldiers and takes off after the Philistines. The Israelites who had hidden in caves for fear, join in and even the Israelites who had joined the Philistines, switched back and re-joined Israel. That day, the LORD saved Israel but not because of Saul, it was in spite of him. Saul’s fear paralyzed him, now his rashness stifles his own army. The victory was not what it could have been.

Read Text:

Imagine that you are riding your bike and ahead of you is a railroad crossing and a train is coming. Do you take the risk and try to beat it? What if you are driving a car and you have a couple of friends with you? What if you are driving a bus and you have 45, 5- and 6-year-old kids on the bus? Good leaders think about the long-term consequences of their choices. You can make a rash, emotional, and irrational vow, but as a leader, you have to think way more about others than you do yourself. Leaders who love others, accept responsibility and lead the sheep. Leaders who love themselves, blame others and try to drive the sheep.

Poor leadership acts as if it’s all about the leader. Success, failure or pressure reveals what kind of a leader a person is. We love what we see in Jonathan. In the face of adversity and overwhelming odds, he is willing to lay down his own life for the fame of God. He is willing to stand alone, if need be, and he does. But sadly, Jonathan is not in charge, his dad is and his dad does not have the character that his son does. Character brings with it a natural influence. You don’t have to be in charge in order to affect others if you have good character. Jonathan did not try to usurp the position of king, but, his example, exposed the weaknesses of his dad and Saul reacted to this embarrassment by issuing orders in an attempt to reassert his authority, but if you have to resort to threatening commands in order to establish your authority, then your authority is very weak. The louder the threat, the shallower the soul. In this text, Saul makes three irrational vows that not only make him look like desperate and insecure, but he puts those under him in an impossible situation.

Poor leadership:

1. **Fails to care about the condition of the people.** (24a)

It was rumored that Marie-Antoinette, wife of Louis XVI and queen of France during the French Revolution said, “Qu’ils mangent de la brioche” which means, “let them eat cake.” She supposedly said this when told that the peasants in the country were starving from the famine and had no bread. She actually never said this, but the story (rumor) came about as an illustration of the brazen disregard that the *noblesse* had for the poor and reflects an utter ignorance of the leadership for the true condition of the citizens. If they don’t have bread, they certainly don’t have cake.

Now, Saul was not raised in a palace, but on a farm. But Proverbs 30.22a warns about what can happen when a slave becomes a king. It is a sweet thing when a lowly person rises through the ranks but does not forget his humble beginnings. It is terrible when he does, and here, it sounds as if Saul forgot where he came from. He forgot what it was like to be a commoner. He failed to consider the true condition of his people.

“And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so”

What would you expect to follow after the word, “so”? I asked several people this week, what they thought would come after the word so. They said

- They were tired
- They rested
- They had a water break

Some, said, maybe the nature of the battle was such that they had to keep fighting, in that case

- The King encouraged them to press on and complete the victory
- The King challenged them and then led them to keep going.

No one thinks that binding people with an oath that curses them for eating any food that day makes any sense whatsoever. Some things people don’t think of because the idea is ingenious. Some people do think of things because the idea is lunacy. This was lunacy. Saul did not care about the condition of his own soldiers because he believed that this day was all about him. He wanted revenge and he didn’t care what he had to do in order to get it. But revenge is a cruel motivation for leadership and leads to a great deal of foolishness.

One of the simple tools that I used as a dad is the “stop, start, more, less” series of questions. This was so helpful to me to learn how I related to my children from their perspective. Can you imagine if Saul had said to an aide, “Find out what you think the men need more than anything?” What a difference that would have made!

Poor leadership:

2. **Puts unrealistic burdens (guilt) on his people.** (24b)

Saul bound his army with an oath that was uttered before God in which he declared a curse on any man who ate any food until it was evening and until he was avenged of his enemies. Saul's obsession with revenge and the pursuit of his glory blinded him to what he was doing to his own people. He was using them to advance his own cause, instead of leading them to advance a greater cause. Saul is putting a weight upon his men that they cannot bear. He is demanding them to fight, while not letting them eat. It is like a dad demanding that his kid cut the grass but not teaching him or her how to operate the mower. On a larger scale it is like Putin demanding that his general kill Ukrainian citizens or risk being arrested and charged with treason.

Leaders who want to be feared do things that keep people under them off balance. They think that being unpredictable keeps them in power makes people depend on them. But, being unpredictable is not a sign of strength, but a sign of instability and when you make rash vows that place unbearable burdens on others, it is irrational and that certainly does not breed confidence in others. Poor leadership...

3. **Is irrational.** (25-30)

How do you expect demanding that your soldiers not eat will motivate them, encourage them, help them be better soldiers? Jonathan is right (v.29). "My father has troubled the land." So, while Israel was saved from the Philistines, the victory was not nearly as great as it could have been. Even if a leader happens to be the smartest person in the room (which is certainly not always the case), does not mean that the leader is always right, or knows everything.

Do you have someone in your life who will tell you when you are being an idiot? You need a person like that. Do you have someone like that? Are you humble enough that you actually have someone who knows that they have the freedom and the responsibility to talk straight up to you if you start going sideways? Will you listen to them? If this is your only takeaway from this message, it will be worth me preaching it.

I've seen situations where older people get snookered out of their estate because someone sweet talked them and took advantage of them and they wouldn't listen to anyone in their family or any of their friends. It's sad and pathetic. But when a leader does something irrational, it affects all sorts of people. In this case, it was his entire army. His irrationality was feared, but it did not breed confidence. Everyone knew that Saul made a foolish vow, but it was Jonathan who was willing to speak about it. Saul's vow sadly led his soldiers into temptation.

4. **Leads into temptation.** (31-33a)

When evening came, the men were so famished that they just slaughtered whatever animals they could get their hands on and began eating the meat raw, not even waiting for the blood to be drained out. The OT law forbade this. This was wrong. But, it was also wrong for Saul to put them into that situation.

Look at what Saul says to the people in v.33. "You have dealt treacherously!" Yes, it is true that the people are breaking the law, but where is the humility on Saul's part? And you begin to see a pattern in his life where he is quick to find fault with everyone else but very slow to admit his own failure. Saul just sucks the air out his soldiers, doesn't he? Instead of commending them for their bravery and valor and exertion in the face of his foolishness, he does not shoulder any of the blame, but instead puts it all on them. It's like not feeding your 2-year-old lunch, not making him take a nap and then screaming at him for being out of control. What an enormous difference it would have made had Saul admitted his part in this. Good leadership leads in taking responsibility for the problems. Good leadership sets the example in confession and seeking forgiveness. Dads, if you want your kids to have tender hearts to the Lord, you need to lead the way.

I walked in on a fight my kids were having one day and instantly I knew what had happened because I'd seen it a hundred times and in my position as judge and executioner, I rendered the verdict and issued the sentence and made no room for excuses, because I knew what had taken place. Except, this time, I didn't. My verdict was wrong and I sentenced the wrong kid. Now what was I going to do? It depends on your view of leadership. Is being a leader always being right, or is it always setting the example? I knew that if I wanted my kids to be quick to confess when they were wrong, I had to be quicker to confess when I was wrong. That is what leadership does. I remember going into the bedroom and admitting my failure and asking forgiveness. My kid hugged me, patted me on the back and said, "It's okay dad, we all make mistakes." But what if I refused to do that? Can you see how that would have led my kid into temptation? They wouldn't know what to do with that? Here is Saul now, telling them to bring their animals to a stone so they can drain the blood out of them so that they can eat them properly, but this man, who is demanding allegiance to the law, is giving laws that make no sense. The whole thing...

5. **Is confusing.** (33b-36)

Saul is trying to make a wrong right. We can appreciate that. But without him admitting to his own folly, it places all of the weight of the failure on his soldiers. Everyone brings the ox they have been able to get and he has them slaughter them and then eat them in a proper way and then Saul builds an altar to the LORD. It's the first one that he has built. There were certain offerings that people were permitted to offer to the Lord, but the author provides no additional commentary on this. What are we supposed to think? Is this a good thing that Saul has done? If it was a bad thing, wouldn't we know it? Perhaps it has the appearance of being a good thing, but Saul is only doing it because it is saving face for him. The reason Saul is so confusing is that even though he builds an altar to the Lord, he doesn't actually rely upon the Lord. Do you see that in verse 36? After taking a break and eating, Saul is ready to advance the fight. Look at v.34. Every one of the people brought his ox with him **that night**. Now, look at v.36. Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines **by night** and plunder them until the morning light." Note the response. "Do whatever seems good to you." But things have changed. There has been a long pause in the battle. And now the priest (Ahijah?) says, "*hey shouldn't we pray first?*" Shouldn't we seek the Lord? Shouldn't we find out if this is what God wants us to do? At

least the priest speaks up. He may still be concerned that the Lord was not properly consulted even before and really feels like this could be a bad idea. Do you see what I see? Saul is rash and impulsive when he should be measured and considerate and he is fearful, hesitant and paralyzed when he should be bold and courageous. Saul is very confusing. This sets us up for a terrible situation. This is what often happens when a leader (point #2) is not open to counsel or correction. Poor Leadership ...

6. Does not admit weakness or failure. (36-42)

When Saul announces (v.36) that they need to resume the fight, they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." Did they really trust him that much and were telling Saul that they were with him no matter what? Or were they saying this because no one dared oppose him anyway? I think it is the latter based on how the rest of the account plays out. The priest inquires of the Lord whether or not they should do this and there is no answer from God. That is not good! How does Saul respond? He immediately blames others (v.38). There is not self-reflection, no humility and no identification with his own people. Then Saul utters another rash vow in v.39 and our hearts fall into our stomachs. Jonathan is the hero in this story. He is the one guy who consistently trusts in God and Saul is willing to kill him. Why would Saul say that? Is Saul really that insecure and fearful that he would kill his own son in order to make himself appear to be that resolute, when we all know he isn't? Is Saul threatened by the success of his son and he sees an opportunity to create distrust in his son in order to stop the emotional momentum that the people would naturally have for him and would therefore wish him to be the king rather than his dad? Here is Saul's opportunity to show them that Jonathan is not as great as you think. He broke an oath! History is full of accounts of kings who kill their sons because they fear losing the throne to them. But, look at the end of v. 39. This is very telling. "**But there was not a man among all the people who answered him.**" That statement is huge! The author is not just telling us the story now. He is commenting on it. He is making this statement because he knows that the reader would expect someone to speak up and say something. After all, Jonathan was the hero. The idea that Jonathan could possibly be put to death is absurd. But no one said anything. They didn't dare! Saul has surrounded himself with people who are afraid to challenge him. But this only raises the stakes and the situation gets worse. When Saul sets up himself and Jonathan on one side and the army on the other and the lot falls on him and Jonathan and then it falls on Jonathan. Yes, we all know that Jonathan ate some honey, but he didn't know that his father had made such a stupid and rash vow. And now his dad will not be denied his authority and Jonathan has to die for it and what is more, Jonathan, the loyal, humble, faithful and fearless son is now on trial and is considered to be guilty and stands before his dad, condemned. Would Saul kill his son? Here, poor leadership...

7. Has to be rescued from itself. (43-46)

Saul is the prosecuting attorney and he demands an answer. Jonathan answers clearly and succinctly. "*I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die.*" There is no excuse given, even though there are two very big excuses that he could have given. 1) Your vow was irrational and 2) I did not know you had given this. Why am I guilty for

something that I did not know about? He could have said that. And had he said that, not only would he have been rescued, but he would have laid bare a breach between him and his dad that would have been the occasion for even more distrust from his dad. Jonathan was not going to do that. But, Jonathan, ever the loyal and faithful son was not going to reflect poorly on his dad and was willing to die for the good of the cause, rather than stand up and defend himself.

V.44 is so hard to read. This is not an honorable man fulfilling his vow at a terrible cost who is truly a man of his word. No, no, no! We are totally disavowed of that in the next chapter. If Saul was an honorable man, he would be seized with agony and despair at the prospect that his son might die and would look for any way possible for this not to take place. At the least he would have the priest ask the Lord if Jonathan had to die. He could volunteer to die in the place of his son. Where is the anguish of a dad whose heart is breaking because his rash and senseless vow is now going to go cost him his son? No, this is an angry, belligerent man who seizes an opportunity to remove a threat to his power and in the name of God strengthen his own grip on the throne. The throne is ruling him now and he is willing to do anything and everything to serve it, including the sacrificing of others, even his own son. Finally, the people speak up and don't let Saul kill Jonathan. Finally.

There was no more pursuing the Philistines that night. No one had the heart for it. Something broke that night and it may never get put back together.

Here is an OT case for why the NT lays out a plurality of elders for leadership in a local church. Men who refuse to be accountable or are not teachable are not fit for leadership. This is also a clear argument for church membership. Every believer needs to realize that he needs the good and godly counsel of faithful believers. Like Saul, we can misread enemies as friends and friends as enemies. We need to be humble and accountable.

Our souls are drawn to Jonathan and rightly so. We breathe an enormous sigh of relief when this innocent guy is spared. There is so much like him that looks like Christ and so much of Saul that doesn't. Look at these 7 points: 1) Christ completely understands his people. 2) Christ does not put guilt on others, he takes it on himself. 3) Christ is gentle, not irrational. 4) He does not lead into temptation 5) Nor is he double-minded and confusing. 6) Christ is humble and lowly, even though he is perfect. 7) He does not need to be rescued from making a terrible decision. Quite the opposite. He was the one who was the victim of a terrible decision, only in his case, the people did not rescue him. He was left alone to die – and he did. He was truly innocent and he died without trying to justify himself so that we could be justified by his death and resurrection. Why would you not want him to be your king – forever?!