

Mark D. Reichert

Pentecost 21 – 1 Samuel 24:1-15 – Right Use of Rights

10/21-25/20 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

“This is a free country, and I have my rights!” Translation: *you can’t tell me what to do*. How often do we hear that sort of thing here in America? We love our rights and freedoms, and they have provided us with as blessed and prosperous a society as has ever existed in this world. But how should we actually use those rights and freedoms? And how do our American rights and freedoms mesh with our Christian rights and freedoms, especially when those two standards don’t agree?

Well in our Old Testament lesson for today, David has a lot to teach us about the best way to stand up for what’s right in the face of a government that tries to force what’s wrong. When a government commands what God forbids or *vice versa*, we see from Scripture that there are really only two options, and in this order: we can remove ourselves from the situation, or if that’s not possible, we will peacefully, respectfully refuse to obey. In other words, we choose flight, not fight. We choose passive resistance, rather than active rebellion or revolution. David has much to teach us here about what our rights really are and how we can use them in a God-pleasing way as people who straddle both of his kingdoms, in both the spiritual and the civil realms. When it comes to our right use of rights, we see here that we should resist evil, respect authority, and realize God’s plan, both in the way he works *through* us and in the way he works *for* us.

So you know the backstory here. King Saul was so jealous of young David that he was bent on chasing him down and killing him. David was a gifted warrior and leader and a faithful subject of the kingdom, who also happened to be anointed as the next-in-line king of Israel and actually was King Saul’s son-in-law; but that didn’t change the fact that Saul wanted him dead. So that put David in a real dilemma. How could he honor the king, and yet protect his life and that of his men? And what about the fact that he was anointed – specially, specifically chosen by God to be the next king of Israel because God had rejected Saul? Didn’t that mean it was his right to take the kingdom for himself, and by any means necessary?

No doubt those questions were weighing on the minds of David and his men when they took shelter in a deep, dark cave that day. Saul’s army was hot on their trail, but what an opportunity it must have seemed like when Saul arrived on the scene, nature called, and he came by himself into that very cave to find some privacy. His men thought the time had finally come for David to see the victory they had all longed for, so they 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.’*”

But were they right? Did David have the right to cut down Saul right there and take the kingdom that had been promised to him? What can we learn here from David about how a Christian should respond to a government that tries to hurt us or to oppose God’s Word? Well, we see first from the fact that David and his men were on the run that God certainly does not want us to just roll over and die. He wants us to protect our lives, our families, our well-beings as much as we possibly can. But he doesn’t

want us to do that by *fighting* back, as such. If we live in a place where the government is threatening us, God wants us first to try to go somewhere else. Whether that’s simply taking a different job or whether it’s moving to an entirely different country, God’s Word says it’s better to leave in peace than to live in defiance. That’s why so many of our forefathers came here to America, in fact, because they were trying to escape from danger or from religious oppression.

But what about when that’s not an option? What about when you’re backed into a corner, and there’s nowhere to go? David shows us here that there is no place in our lives for rebellion or revolution, for actively trying to overthrow the government in authority over us. David’s men were right, he was the next king and Saul was right there in his hands. But David knew that’s not how God wants his people to treat their authorities. David’s conscience even tore him up after he went to cut off just a tiny piece of Saul’s robe! Now that might’ve seemed like a harmless act – maybe just as harmless as defacing someone’s political yard sign or sharing an off-color internet meme – but David recognized that if whatever we do is disrespectful or dishonorable in even the smallest way, then that’s not how God wants us to act toward his representatives.

David shows us here that Christians have the right to *resist* evil, not to propagate it. When a government is hell bent on doing wrong or requiring us to do something contrary to God’s Word, we *cannot* give in. God’s representatives don’t have the right to oppose God himself, so we follow his higher authority instead. And what happens after that, who knows. But like the prophets and apostles and martyrs did before us, even if we have to suffer fines, jailtime, or death, we can do so with the joy of being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ and with the knowledge that we will find justice in heaven from whatever injustices we’ve ever had to suffer here on earth.

Yes, David showed us that we Christians have the right to resist evil – he resisted the evil Saul wanted to do to him by escaping from harm, and he refused to fall into the evil of rebellion by hurting or killing King Saul. But that’s not the only lesson we can learn from David here. We also learn that we have the right to *respect* authority, not to disparage it. And you can see that in the way that David talks about King Saul here. Four times in these verses he addresses Saul in a special way. He calls him *my master, the Lord’s anointed, my lord the king, my father*, and he even bowed down to the ground in front of him. No matter how many nasty things Saul and his advisors were saying and assuming about David, David refused to be pulled down to that level. He always spoke about Saul with the utmost admiration and treated him with the utmost reverence. Even if Saul the man wasn’t particularly worthy of respect, still David respected him for the sake of his office, for the sake of the Lord whom he represented.

And that speaks volumes for us in how we can act toward our government authorities as well. You know really, respecting our authorities is as much an 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment issue as it is about the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment. We “honor our father and mother” and others in authority when we don’t give false testimony against our neighbors in the government, but rather defend them, speak well of them, and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way. No, that doesn’t mean we should look at everything the government says and does with rose-colored glasses; we know full well that there’s plenty of precedent for that old proverb, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

But even so, we should remember just as much another old proverb to live by: if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all. The way David spoke about King Saul here is an excellent example for us when we talk about Presidents or politicians past and present, or when we get into discussions on political policy around the coffee table or on the computer screen. Even if you finally don't agree with a certain politician or political stance, trying to listen and understand and sympathize will always help you be civil in your discourse – and that's also the best way to get people to listen to what *you* say and believe as well.

No, we Christians do not have the right to disparage authority; we have the right to respect it in our words and in our actions because God established it for our good. So then finally David shows us here that Christians do not have the right to oppose God's plan or force it upon others; rather, we have the right to *realize* God's plan for ourselves – that is, to bring it to realization in our own lives and also to realize how God plans to deliver us from a government that may be corrupt and abusive. “[David] said to Saul, ‘Why do you listen when men say, ‘David is bent on harming you’? 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 lord, because he is the LORD’s anointed.’ 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.”

Isn't there a lesson here about being careful about what you listen to and knowing who to trust? David got some bad counsel from his companions earlier, but he rejected it. Saul got some bad advice from his counselors, and he took it. Now look where it led both of them! When it comes to what we hear about our leaders in government, we need to be very careful not to get caught up in hysteria or false information. Always take what you hear with a grain of salt. Make sure that whatever conclusions you come to are based as much as possible on verifiable facts. And assume the best of whomever it is you're talking about.

But now also, think about this. If you believe that the government is heading in a direction that is not good for you or for society as a whole, what do you think is the best way to get through to them: by yelling and complaining and criticizing them, or by supporting and appreciating and respecting them? Pretty obviously, it's the latter, right? Attacking someone isn't a good way to show them you're on the same side and are committed to the same success for society. But doing what David did here when he gave a rundown of why Saul should trust him and reminded him of his track record of loyalty – that's a good way for us to get through to our leaders, too. When they can clearly see how much we care and how much we back their work and welfare, even an ungodly government will be that much more likely to listen and change for our benefit. Yes, it really is true what God's Word says – for David and for us – that when we are respectful of our authorities, it will go well for us (*Ephesians 6:2-3*) and that really will be to our advantage (*Hebrews 13:17*).

But now don't take that respectfulness and loyalty to mean that we shouldn't say what needs to be said clearly and strongly. David certainly did that here, and we should as well. “*You are hunting me down to take my life... As the old saying goes, ‘From evildoers come evil deeds,’ so my hand will not*

*touch you. Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Who are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea? May the LORD be our judge and decide between us.”* David said to Saul that *he* wasn't the one causing trouble in this situation; Saul was! He had no reason to be wasting all that time and all those resources chasing David all over the kingdom when he had much better things to do like ruling the kingdom and protecting it from the Philistines, who were an *actual* threat to the people! And just like David, when we see the government doing wrong, we shouldn't be afraid to say so, either. Especially as Americans, we have the right to do that, and in a democratic society, we *need* to do that in order to keep our politicians honest and our society moving in a generally right direction. So let's speak up when we need to! Let's support the right to life and honor traditional marriage. Let's say no, we don't need to spend millions more on probe after probe because of whatever personal vendetta you may have. No, you don't need to be getting caught up in a Twitter spat with another reporter or sports figure. Call, write, post on social media, attend town halls, protest peacefully, let your voice be heard at the polls! Especially in a country like ours that allows and even depends on the input of its citizens, we Christians who have consciences properly calibrated by God's Word need to stand up for what is truly right and moral and good for society, and we need to express that in the votes we cast and in the opinions we share!

But even if that government doesn't listen to us, even if it continues down its destructive path to the detriment of its people, we should remember like David did: one way or another, God is going to make everything right in the end. Did you notice this theme that David kept coming back to? “*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... 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.*” Again, when government does us wrong, we don't have the right to rebel or revolt. We have the right to trust God to deliver us in his own best time and way. Ultimately, we remember that our citizenship is in heaven; that's our first priority and our primary loyalty. It's not our job as Christians to use the government to bring heaven down to earth; it's our job to use the Gospel to one day bring the people of earth up to heaven. So whether political happenings go our way or not, let's serve God's two kingdoms as faithfully as we can, and let's simply put our lives in his hands for everything else until he either delivers us from our troubles here or finally delivers us from *all* our troubles by taking us there.

So for American Christians, what's the right use of rights? We honor God and the government by using our rights and freedoms selflessly wherever they agree, and we defer to God's Word wherever they don't. That's how we can use our rights and freedoms in the best way for the good of those around us and for the glory of our Lord. Yes, as an American Christian, you have the right not to go places that require you to wear a mask if you don't want to. You have the right to stay home and not spend money at places you don't agree with. You even have the right to petition the government if you object to their policies. But you do not have the right to ignore or defy a law simply because you don't like it, and most of all, we would never use our rights to let our political stances keep us from standing solidly on the Gospel to feed our faith and to share our faith. No, let's remember that for us, the right use of rights is to resist evil, to respect authority, and to realize God's plan for your life in the civil realm and in the spiritual realm, for now and for eternity. Amen.