

A Two Part Sermon about Wisdom and Humility

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Part I: A Lesson About Humility from David

2 Samuel 16:5-14, 2 Samuel 19:18-23

FIRST READING:

*Narrator: King David has just had to flee Jerusalem because his son Absalom, who the people love, has declared himself king in David's place.*

*Let's join the story... at 2 Samuel 16:5-14...*

When King David came to Bahurim,

a man of the family of the house of Saul came out whose name was Shimei son of Gera;

he came out cursing. He threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David;

now all the people and all the warriors were on his right and on his left.

Shimei shouted while he cursed,

Shimei: Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel!

The LORD has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul,

in whose place you have reigned;

and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom.

See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood.'

Narrator: Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king,

Abishai: 'Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?

Let me go over and take off his head.'

Narrator: But the king said,

David: What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah?

If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, "Curse David",

who then shall say, "Why have you done so?" '

Narrator: David said to Abishai and to all his servants,

David: 'My own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite!

Let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD has bidden him.

It may be that the LORD will look on my distress,\*

and the LORD will repay me with good for this cursing of me today.'

Narrator: So David and his men went on the road,

while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went, throwing stones and flinging dust at him.

The king and all the people who were with him arrived weary at the Jordan;

\*and there he refreshed himself.

*The story goes on to relate how Absalom, David's rebellious son, is killed,*

*and David returns towards Jerusalem to take up his kingship again. As he travels along the road, Shimei comes to meet David:*

*We join the story again a few chapters later at 2 Samuel 19:18-23*

Shimei son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, and said to the king,

Shimei: 'May my lord not hold me guilty or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem; may the king not bear it in mind. For your servant knows that I have sinned; therefore, see, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king.'

Narrator: Abishai son of Zeruiah answered,

Abishai: Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD's anointed?'

Narrator: But David said,

David: 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?'

Narrator: The king said to Shimei,

David: 'You shall not die.'

Narrator: And the king gave him his oath.

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David is well known in the Bible, he is probably Israel's most famous king. We are told by the prophet Samuel that David is a man after God's own heart.

Our story today is not one of the most famous David stories. It's a little story about David's encounter with a man who is not that important, a man named Shimei. Shimei was from the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest tribe in Israel. The tribe of Benjamin was not very famous or powerful, but the first king of Israel, King Saul, came from that tribe. Saul was the King before David, but he did things that God disapproved of, and so David was anointed as king in his place. Saul and David fought battles over who should be king---this eventually led to Saul's death. So David was not very popular with the tribe of Benjamin.

When this story with Shimei takes place, Saul is long dead, and David has been king for years. Now suddenly David's son Absalom, who has a lot of popular support, has declared that he is king instead of David. David is afraid for his life so he is fleeing Jerusalem, his capital city, with his loyal soldiers.

It's in this retreat that the character Shimei shows up throwing stones and dust and yelling insults at David. Shimei is standing up for Saul, his fellow Benjaminite. The text does not say

that he had a slingshot...because that would be a weapon, a very effective weapon as David himself knew (he killed Goliath with a slingshot). Shimei wasn't trying to kill anyone, he was just trying to make his point, and insult David.

David's general, Abishai, gets very hot under the collar, seeing David insulted like this. He calls Shimei a dead dog, and wants to chop off his head. How does David react? We see David being rather philosophical about Shimei's curses. He wonders whether God might be in Shimei's words in some way. And he won't let his general kill Shimei. He passes by Shimei and doesn't kill him.

The story continues after some time has passed. Important things have happened. Absalom, the upstart son, has been killed, David is king again, and he is travelling back to Jerusalem. Shimei shows up again, and this time he apologizes to David, and takes back everything he said. David accepts his apology and makes an oath before God not to kill Shimei.

I find this whole story striking. We see David showing restraint when he does not have much power, and we see him showing restraint when he does have power. The first time he met Shimei, he had lost his throne, he was on the run, vulnerable and open to attack. David would have been tempted to come down hard on anyone who insulted him, because he didn't have much power left. It probably would have felt good to kill someone, to show everyone, "Look I am still a force to be reckoned with!" But instead David wonders whether God might be with Shimei. In David's mind, the jury is out over why he lost his kingship, so he is reluctant to kill someone who might be a prophet.

Later David has regained the throne, he is the supreme ruler. Shimei is totally in his power, and he could kill him. But he doesn't. He says, "Do I not know that I am king over Israel?" He doesn't have to kill someone to show he has power. He knows he is king.

And something else is holding back David's hand. David has just seen in a terrible way how power can be abused. He had ordered his general to capture his rebellious son Absalom, but instead they had killed him. I think David decides not to kill Shimei because he is sick of killing. He doesn't want to use his power in a negative way. There will be no more violence as David walks back to Jerusalem.

In both of these situations, the fleeing from Jerusalem without power situation, and the walking back to Jerusalem with power situation, David shows humility and restraint. He chooses not to use violence. He is tentative about his claims regarding God, he is wondering, he is open to thinking about things. And so that's why I titled this part of the sermon "A Lesson from David About Humility".

How does this apply to our life? How are we like David? What stage of life are you in right now? Are you someone whose power has been taken away, or are you someone with a great deal of power?

There are lots of reasons in our life that we lose power. Sometimes we lose our job, through an economic crisis or sickness, and suddenly you don't have the power to pay your bills or buy things you want to buy. Sometimes retirement can mean a loss of power. You used to have lots of responsibility and people looked up to you because of that. And then, often with a single signature, you sign your retirement papers and you don't have that same power.

People who have children can sometimes feel powerless, as your sleep and all your time is preoccupied with caring for children with tremendous needs.

If you are in a place where your power has been reduced, how do you respond when people challenge you, or insult you, or when you feel threatened in some way? The temptation is to get very worked up. "How dare they insult me!" You know you don't have as much power as you used to, so the power you do have, you hold onto with a death grip. You worry that the world looks down on you. You have something to prove, and so you blast this person that has put you down to show how strong you are. But instead, can you be like David and just walk away? Can you have the humility to ask, "Is God trying to tell me something through this person?"

Have you seen someone who doesn't have much power in society lashing out, being very angry, even being violent? It happens, it's a way of responding to feeling powerless.

Or maybe you are at the stage in your life where you have a lot of power. Like David on the throne, you are at the top of your game, you have a lot of power. Someone insults you. What do you do?

If I am insecure, I'll use my power to hurt the offending person; "Don't they know who I am?" Or can you let it go, resting secure in your position. We don't have to flex our muscles to impress people. David says, "Do I not know that I am king over Israel?" David doesn't have to use power to feel like a king.

When you have a lot of power, you don't often have to do the dirty work yourself. You can get people to do it for you. Abishai would have happily have assassinated Shimei. When people insult me, I may not do anything about it, but I might tell my friends what happened. They won't kill anyone for me, but they would say bad things about that person. We can use our power or influence to hurt another person, "That will teach them for insulting me!"

From this story, I can see why David is a man after God's own heart...there is something wise in David's humility in this story. David is so human, in the best sense of the word, in this story. He is open to seeing God everywhere, even in his enemies. David is a model for us in this story.

## Part II: A Lesson about Wisdom from David

For Part II of this sermon, we have to continue on in scripture with David and Shimei the Benjaminite. David, on his deathbed, is imparting his final wisdom to Solomon, his son, his successor to the throne. This is his last speech. Let's listen to this scripture...keep your ears tuned for Shimei's name.

Narrator: *Many years pass, and David became an old man.  
His son Solomon is set to become king after him.  
We join the story at I Kings 2:1-12*

When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying:

David: I am about to go the way of all the earth.

Be strong, be courageous,<sup>3</sup> and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances,

and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses,  
so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.  
Then the LORD will establish his word that he spoke concerning me:  
"If your heirs take heed to their way,  
to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul,  
there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.  
Moreover, you know also what Joab son of Zeruah did to me,  
how he dealt with the two commanders of the armies of Israel,  
Abner son of Ner, and Amasa son of Jether, whom he murdered,  
retaliating in time of peace for blood that had been shed in war,  
and putting the blood of war on the belt around his waist,  
and on the sandals on his feet.  
Act therefore according to your wisdom,  
but do not let his grey head go down to Sheol in peace.  
Deal loyally, however, with the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite,  
and let them be among those who eat at your table;  
for with such loyalty they met me when I fled from your brother Absalom.  
There is also with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite from Bahurim,  
who cursed me with a terrible curse on the day when I went to Mahanaim;  
but when he came down to meet me at the Jordan,  
I swore to him by the LORD, "I will not put you to death with the sword."  
Therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man;  
you will know what you ought to do to him,  
and you must bring his grey head down with blood to Sheol.'

Narrator: Then David slept with his ancestors,  
and was buried in the city of David.  
The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years;  
he reigned for seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.  
So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David;  
and his kingdom was firmly established.

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So there's the kicker. With his final breath, David tells Solomon to be strong, courageous and faithful to the Law, and he tells him to murder Shimei. It turns out David is still angry at Shimei for throwing rocks and dust at him and cursing him all those years ago. He is so angry that he wants Solomon to murder this man.  
"Therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man;  
you will know what you ought to do to him,  
and you must bring his grey head down with blood to Sheol.'

Even though once he thought maybe Shimei had something to tell him from God, now all he can remember is that he was insulted by this man. Even though Shimei apologized and David promised not to kill him, now David is arranging his death. The following chapters show that Solomon does indeed murder Shimei at David's request.

It's a pretty sobering story. And the Bible story, as Bible stories often do, just relates what happens. It doesn't say, "This is a good thing that David did" or "This is a bad thing that David did". The writer leaves it up to us. We read the story, and we can decide.

So what do you think? I have been thinking about this story all week. David was walking a wise path in the first story, when the incident between himself and Shimei took place. I think David makes three unwise decisions here.

The first unwise decision is that he decides to hold a grudge against Shimei. He didn't at first, but over time, the fact that Shimei insulted him, really begins to bother him.

David is human, just like us. I have seen people do exactly what David is doing, and I am sure you have seen it too. Someone hurts you, and at first you can forgive them, sometimes it takes some hard work, but you do it. You refuse to pick up the burden of spite and revenge. But over time you think about it, and you think about it, and that burden of spite and revenge looks awfully attractive, and you pick it up and hold it close.

I have seen myself doing exactly what David does here. I had an extended family member who I really hated because of some things he had done to someone else in the family. At the time when hurtful things happened, I worked hard to get over that, I prayed about it, and I think I did reach a place of forgiveness and understanding. But somewhere along the way, as the years passed, I just gave up. I just started to hate him again. I just stopped doing the hard continuing work of forgiveness and I picked up that burden of spite because I liked the feeling of hating someone.

The second unwise decision is that David is not content with holding this grudge himself, he tries to enlist other people to be part of the grudge too. He enlists Solomon's help, and urges him to commit murder on his behalf.

Revenge loves company. It's hard to be revengeful all by yourself, it's better if there's a crowd, so that you can agree together on how bad someone is. This is the root of gossip, you aren't content to think bad thoughts by yourself, you want to share them, you want other people to confirm that your bad thoughts are right. And so you share it with them, and they share it with another person, and on it goes. In the case of the family member that I hated, when I got together with another family member we would talk about this person that we both had no use for.

"That Shimei, what a traitor. In the traitor department, he is the worst of all, don't you think? No one worse than Shimei. He deserves to die!" And so the sins of the father are visited on the son; David is not content to hold onto his bad decision, he wants to share it with others.

Now maybe you want to draw a line between David and yourself. David was talking about assassination, after all, and none of us is putting contracts out on people's lives. All we do is gossip, once a while, just a bit of character assassination. But here's the thing. We are as destructive as the power we have access to. The more power you have, the more destructive you can be. If we are honest with ourselves, there are probably people in our lives, or have been people in our lives, that we would like to eliminate. In our society, there are consequences, laws, punishments to prevent us from acting on our negative thoughts. If there were no consequences, if we had ultimate power, I think a lot of us would be doing a lot worse things than gossiping. I think David had the power, and he used it, in this case for the evil cause of revenge.

So the first mistake David made was that he held onto a grudge. And second, he works to share that grudge with his son Solomon. The third mistake is that he seems to be totally oblivious to the fact that he is making an unwise decision.

In the same breath that he is talking about keeping God's law and being faithful, he is plotting a murder. He doesn't have any awareness that he is being inconsistent.

David was human, just like us. I think one of the biggest challenges we have is lack of self-awareness. We can't see our own inconsistencies. I am sure you have observed people displaying a lack of self-awareness. It happens all the time. Like when your extremely frugal friend is critical of someone else who is "penny-pinching". Or when the person you know who flies off the handle all the time, is critical of someone for losing their temper. Or when your self-absorbed brother complains that everyone around him is too self-absorbed.

David tells Solomon to be wise, but is oblivious to how unwise his own advice is!

The lesson about wisdom that David is teaching us here is a negative lesson. He is showing us that when you think you are the most wise, you might be the furthest away from God.

The tragedy is that David was close to God's heart at a certain point in his life. In the past he was filled with humility and wisdom, but here at the end of his life, he is filled with vengefulness and spite. Yet David felt he was God's man, he had written all those Psalms hadn't he?

We are human, just like David. What happened to David, God's man, could happen to us. Just because you have been a Christian your whole life, doesn't mean that you will stay that way, that you are immune from taking a very wrong path. Even though I have gone to church for decades, I could be mouthing the truth, but living out something that is very far from the way of Jesus. That's where humility comes in, that's where community comes in. This week, can you pray for wisdom, can we listen to the advice that we give each other? We need to seek wisdom together.

We need to do this because there is a lot at stake. We don't know what's going to happen down the line because of our choices. David counsels Solomon to start off his reign with a wave of violence. And Solomon follows that path, and continues to follow it. Solomon ultimately chooses not to follow Yahweh, God, and allows idols to be set up in Israel. And this results in the division of the kingdom into pieces, and a lot of hardship and suffering for all the Israelites.

How are the choices we are making today going to affect the next generation, and the generation after that? We just don't know. Like a space ship aiming for a distant planet, the tiniest of mistakes at the beginning of the trajectory can mean entirely missing the mark.

Today we have heard a lesson about humility, a lesson about wisdom, drawn from the life of David, a David with power, a David without power. It is a descendent of David, Jesus, a Jesus with power, a Jesus without power, who showed us a life of true humility. He was human, just like us. His wisdom guides us still. And it's to Jesus' table that we are now invited.