



Sermon

Where do you run to?

1 Samuel 21:1-22:2

29th July 2012

Mrs Helen Hardcastle

© 2012

How should I judge when it is right and good to bend the rules? I think of that sometimes when I am driving, especially when I am in a hurry! “Oh, I can’t wait for the green arrow to come on – the people have already used the crossing, I’ll just sneak around the corner... After all, I *usually* keep the rules.”

When I am in a hurry, to break a road rule is usually to benefit myself rather than other people. That should be a flag to me that I may be out of order. I need to be careful of my attitude. Many people think, “Rules are good. People should keep rules... except for me. I am a special exception.” In your dreams, mate!

In the first century, to make a path through someone’s grain field was illegal for anyone but the King. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is making a statement of Kingship as he walks through the cornfield. He was not yet crowned King, but he had been anointed by the HS on his baptism day. David was not yet crowned King when he ate the consecrated bread, but he was anointed as King already. Both were acting in faith according to what God had promised.

So, when challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus appeals to the example of David, the greatest King in Israel’s history. To pick corn on the Sabbath was considered harvesting and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. Jesus here is making clear that he is in charge. He is a higher authority than the rule book.

Actually, both Ahimelech the priest and Jesus teach us that the spirit of the law is more important than the letter of the law. The spirit of the law is that we should fulfill the two greatest commandments, the ones Jesus said were: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Does anyone remember my shorthand for those two laws? (Snuggle up and play nicely.)

David didn’t deal outside the law and snatch the kingdom for himself. He respected King Saul whom God had put in power. Despite David’s abilities and his popularity, he never used these strengths to stage a coup or anything like that. Saul remained King despite his faults, until God decided to remove him.

When David’s life was in danger from Saul, his only choice was to flee. Any other decision would mean putting other people or Saul in danger and he had no desire to do either of those.

The first time David ran, he went to Samuel, the man of God. But Saul tracked him down there. This time, he runs 2 ½ miles straight downhill at top speed to Nob, to the house of God, where Ahimelech the priest is. No sword, no provisions - he probably didn’t even stop for a toothbrush! He must have looked quite dishevelled when he arrived – Ahimelech was so scared, he was shaking.

Ahimelech was of a noble family and even possibly a contender for the throne. Perhaps he was scared that this powerful man from the royal court had come to kill him. It would be like looking down the barrel of James Bond's pistol and thinking, "What has he heard about me?"

But David notices that one of Saul's servants, Doeg, was there listening and watching. David had to quickly make himself scarce again, talking Goliath's sword, a weapon he was used to handling.

He also needed provisions for the next stage of his escape – and there on the altar was the covenant bread. Normally only the priests were allowed to eat this – it was called the Bread of the Presence. Ahimelech gave it to him and David fled over the mountains to Gath – straight to a Philistine stronghold where he probably felt sure Saul would never find him. But he was out of luck again. Some Philistines recognized him straight away and he quickly made himself look mad in order to save his life. Another refuge plan bites the dust.

You can learn a lot about a person by where they run when they are in trouble. Some people reach for the alcohol. Others run for a cigarette. Some dig themselves a deeper hole by gambling. Others try to ignore trouble in the hope it will all go away. Some shout loudly that someone else is to blame. Others don't run anywhere, but turn in on themselves and get depressed. Where do you run when trouble strikes?

David fled first to the house of God. There he got provisions and a weapon. Food and equipment. When you came to church this morning, did you realize that you would receive food and equipment? Nourishment for your soul and weapons for the battle we all face daily – and it comes through the other believers supporting us, worship and the Word of God, the Bible. Here I am presenting to you what is hopefully a tasty dish of Scriptural nourishment and offering ideas on how to use scripture in the daily battle we all face. The Word of God is useful for nourishing our souls and useful to dispatch the lies the enemy of our souls tries to feed us.

I wonder if anybody here has ever read or heard a Scripture which has seemed very special at the time. Often that is how God will give us encouragement or instruction. It is useful to have a small notebook in which to write down the Scriptures, encouragements and promises of God from time to time. Then we can look back on them when trouble strikes, reminding ourselves and God. Thus we gain comfort and hope from the encouragements and promises.

I looked back over my diaries to find an example. One March morning I wrote down a scripture which seemed to be drawn to my attention. It was 2 Chronicles 20:17 "You will not need to fight this battle. Stand firm; hold your position and you will see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf."

I did not know why the scripture was important when I wrote it down, but the next day there is a diary entry - Listen to Helen the drama queen: "I am so ashamed. I feel like buying a one-way ticket to the nearest enclosed convent so that I could seek God and be hidden from the eyes of all who might otherwise see my shame and hurt."

When I wrote that, my eye flicked back to the scripture that I had written down the day before and was comforted and encouraged. "You will not need to fight this battle. Stand firm; hold your position and you will see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf." And God DID change the situation to help me.

David was in need of encouragement after being driven out of Gath as a madman. He travelled South, deep into the mountains to the cave of Adullam. There, men gathered who would be shunned anywhere else and he gets about 400 distressed or debt-ridden men who come in dribs and drabs up to the mouth of the cave. David is taking onto his team all sorts of misfits and malcontents and it looks as if he is moving further and further away from God's call on his life.

How will these contradictions be resolved? At this point he is probably in a state of high tension and all he has to hold onto is the promise of God that he will be king.

All of us have tensions and contradictions in our lives. All of us have times when we cannot understand why God would allow such a situation to happen. Life has a way of turning to custard when we least expect it. This can be from our own disobedience, or from things we have not dealt with properly from the past or just from living in a fallen world, where we are faced with a spiritual battle every day. The battle is described by Jesus' words in John 10:

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

So, if we belong to Jesus, the good shepherd, and our peace has been stolen or there is destruction and death in our circumstances, we know who is responsible – and it's not Jesus! It's because of the battle headed up by Satan, in opposition to all that God wants for us. The victory which we all covet, has been won by Jesus on the cross, laying down his life for us like a good shepherd, who values his lambs' lives above his own. Our challenge is to hold on to the fact that God is good and work with him to implement his good and gracious rulership, his kingdom here on earth.

Some Christians face problems with a grim determination not to be beaten. They say, "Things could be worse. Praise the Lord anyway. We'll get there." They focus only on the promises of God and don't acknowledge that any problem exists. Others focus on the difficult circumstances they find themselves in. They grumble and complain. They question the goodness of God because of what they face. The promises of God fade in their minds and life gets difficult to face.

The Psalms and other Christian songs remind us of God's faithfulness when life gets tough. In the Psalms, David pulls no punches. He is completely honest before God about the mess things are in and the hatred he experiences from his enemies, but he also reminds God of his promises and praises him for his steadfast love. Psalms 55-58 are all psalms written when David was under severe persecution and in all of them he calls out his distress to God and also praises God's faithfulness and glory.

Here's snippet from Psalm 57:

⁴ I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts--men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. ⁵ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth. ⁶ They spread a net for my feet--I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path--but they have fallen into it themselves. ⁷ My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music.

So David's example tells us to dial both up –on the one hand, acknowledging the pain we face and on the other, the goodness of God. That is the crucible for faith – holding these two things in tension. We tell him our pain, cling to his goodness and he rescues us from trouble. That's faith in action.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

It is possible to choose to be honest with God about our struggles and also to praise and act as if his promises were true. This is walking by faith and it really pleases God.

I was talking with a new Christian last week about praying the Lord's Prayer. I said "You can trust God to provide your needs. Just ask him "Give me today my daily bread." " A few days later, she was in hospital having had a brush with death. Her two children and her mother were with her in the hospital and she started to be concerned about the children needing an evening meal.

She remembered our discussion of the Lord's Prayer - "Just ask Him. Lord, give us today our daily bread." Seconds after that thought, there was a knock at the door. A wardmaid said "I have three spare meals left over from the patients' dinner – would you like them?" The meals were ones her fussy children would enjoy and they polished the plates!

She exercised faith while in a difficult situation and it pleased God.

If you need strength today to face a difficult situation, if you need bread for the journey, reach out to God who will give you the Bread of his Presence. He will strengthen you and you will be comforted and helped. Draw near to him by faith and he will draw near to you.