

Modern Longings – Ancient Words: *Godly Leadership*

Psalm 25

I want to speak to you today about what the Bible consistently says is the heart of a godly leader.

I think that this is a very relevant topic for us here at LAC with our Nominating Committee hard at work to bring us a list of candidates to step into elected leadership roles as well as with our Sr. Pastor Search Committee beginning its work to recommend someone to us to be the next Sr. Pastor.

Let me make **two preliminary points about the Bible's description of godly leadership** right now:

First, what the Bible teaches us about the heart of a godly leader may be hard for us to apply to our nation's political candidates as we enter into our nation's presidential campaign season. By that, I mean that you may want to evaluate all the candidates running for office in light of the Bible's words about what a godly leader's character and ways should be like – I know I do that. And, I will say this: All candidates who profess to be Christians have the same calling of applying their faith to their lives that all of us have i.e., they and we should be growing in ways that demonstrate Christlikeness in our workplaces. That is true of whether you are a politician, student, business person, or stay at home parent, etc.

When we make it known that we are followers of Jesus, the world will judge what Jesus is like by watching us! And, that is very true of a Christian in politics. Now, I am convinced that God sends his people into the political arena just like he sends his people into almost all careers. But, you also need to know that the Bible always expects a godly leader to be very different from the leadership we will generally see in our world. A true follower of Jesus will be salt and light in the world – not like the world. Our main allegiance is always to the kingdom of God and that always makes it that we don't fit well into one political ideology or another.

Second, all of us have influence that we exert over others by the way we live our lives. I say this because a can imagine some thinking that you don't need to hear what God's Word says about the heart of a godly leader because you're not in a leadership role now, i.e., you're not the CEO of a company, the chair of a committee or board, the parent in a family, the captain of a sports team, etc. But, I want you to know that we all exert influence in countless ways each day of our lives. This has become so clear to me as we've had three generations in our home over the past few weeks. I'm the patriarch in the family, the oldest adult. But, I can tell you any one of us can either bless or wreck the family peace in a matter of seconds. A loud scream, and angry shout, an accusation that, "She hit me" can take us from harmony to misery in "the twinkling of an eye".

That is to say that **what the Bible says about godly leadership – or godly influence – has something to say to each of us and to how we live in each relationship we have each day of our lives.** And, I know of no passage in the Bible that speaks more clearly about the heart of a godly leader than Psalm 25.

Psalm 25 Overview

The superscription over Psalm 25 tells us it was a Psalm of King David. From the earliest times that we have any Jewish or Christian commentaries on this Psalm, Scripture scholars have said it was written sometime after David had sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba, a sin that led to ongoing lying and cover-up and even to murder. You can read about it in 2 Sam 8-12. The consequences of King David's sins had affected David, his family and his nation – and David knew it. In fact, notice how the Psalm ends in **v. 22**: "*Deliver Israel, O God, from all her troubles.*" King David knew he was a main cause of those troubles.

So, this poem reveals all the emotions of a leader who knows he has done serious wrongs, wrongs that are damaging others. He feels shame for what he has become that he expresses both at the beginning and the end. He knows he is guilty and that he needs forgiveness. He longs for a new start.

The Psalm itself is organized in a way that expresses those shifting emotions that we feel as human beings when we're wrestling with shame and guilt. It's what's called an acrostic, i.e., the first word in each of its first 21 verses is a word starting with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Can you imagine writing a poem like that in English? What words would you start with when you would come to the letters Q or X? The effect of this is that this Psalm, different from most of David's, does not have a logical flow but moves back and forth between a man who is repentant for his sin but still has hope that things might be different in the future.

What is Psalm 25 About? **A leader who believes in God has messed up badly. What he has done has far-reaching consequences. So, he confesses his failure transparently, and seeks to have God take over the situation and make the future different from the past.**

Remember that David was still the king. Some of his most difficult years were ahead of him – but also some of his most fruitful. So, take note of this now: **God did not write David off because of his failure but restored him to usefulness.** So, what do we see in this Psalm that makes it possible for imperfect people like David was - and we all are -- to provide godly and health-giving influence in the lives of those we touch?

The Self-Awareness of a Godly Leader – *Do not remember my rebellious ways (v.7). Forgive my iniquity for it is great (v.11b). Take away all my sins (v.18b).*

Throughout this entire Psalm, I sense David refusing to do what he had done for many months after he had engaged in that series of sins starting with his adultery, i.e., he had tried to cover them up. After the adultery and the murder that it led to, at least six months went by – and all the time David was wearing his kingly robes, worshipping with his people, and maybe even composing his psalms. He behaved to all the world as if he was that good and just leader – the “practically perfect in every way” king -- that all thought him to be.

Have you ever done that sort of thing? I ask that because I think there is a warning to us all in this! This part of David’s story is one of sexual unfaithfulness, deceit, cover-up, lying, disregard for others, abuse of authority... and many other sins. But, if you come to this sermon and only think, “That David is nothing but a scoundrel. I’m glad I’m not a sinner like he was” – then you’ve missed the point. **This is not a story meant to lead us to gloat over or condemn David. It’s here to have us all examine our hearts** – just as David did in Psalm 25. And if you won’t do that in the light of Scripture today, know that there will come a day when God will break in to your life too.

Let me tell you this: In **being** a sinner, David was as we all are. **Where David parted company with many others was not in being a sinner – but in how he responded to the conviction of God in his life** when God’s prophet broke into his life and said, “David, you are the one who has done wrong.”

So often, I’ve experienced church people when their sins have come out into the open. Some hear God’s voice, feel remorse for a short time, and then go back to living as they did before. Others give up, leave the church and say, “I’m so horrible, I’ll quit everything. I’ll never serve God again.”

But, David did not do either of those things. David confessed his sins, found forgiveness, and then made himself available to be used by God again. However, this could happen only after he had become transparent about his sins and his desperate need of mercy. After that, he lived differently: no pretenses, no self-congratulation. **God often does his greatest work in our lives when our illusions of superiority and self-sufficiency have been stripped away.**

What I see in the godly leaders I know are lives that are born out of the kind of self-awareness I see developing in David in Ps 25. He began to have **qualities like:** Transparency (v.7), humility (v. 9a), a teachable spirit (v.9b), a fear of the Lord (vv.14-15), and a longing for personal integrity and uprightness (v.21).

Let me tell you why I think this kind of self-awareness is key to godly leadership. I have discovered that **the godly leaders who have brought grace and blessing to others in their churches or organizations have been those who have owned up to their own failures and their personal need of mercy and grace.** I know that failure and wrongdoing are those realities in all our lives that often cause shame and guilt. But, they can also be the realities that enable us to give up any illusion that our own resources or plans or manipulative ways can get us out of the dark corners we often get ourselves and others into – as David had done.

The foundational point for godly leadership is not discovering new rules or techniques of how to manage people. **The starting point is this: Any of us who will influence others positively will come from a place of being aware of our own sin and being recipients God’s mercy and grace -- instead of from where many leaders in our world come from, i.e., from places of personal ego and pride.** If you accept the biblical teaching that all of us have fallen short of God’s glory, then you will understand that an essential part of godly leadership is the honest self-awareness that leads you to say, “I too have sinned and need God’s grace”. When you do, that confession will almost inevitably be followed by engaging in the very, very deep spiritual work of opening up your inner life to God, allowing him to reveal to you the wounds inside you. He then will be able to heal them, instead of you trying to conceal them.

And that brings us to a 2nd trait we see in King David:

The God-Awareness of a Godly Leader –*Your great love and mercy are from old (v.6). Remember me according to your love for you are good (v.7). All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful...(v.10). For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive... (v.11).*

David's conversion from being a self-directed to a God-directed leader is communicated most poignantly in the opening line, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." This theme of surrender to God's control reappears in v.2, "I put my trust in you ..." and again in v.5, "in you have I trusted all day long."

This Psalm could have been a poem of despair because of the serious consequences of David's failure, failure that led him to face opposition not only from enemy armies but from his own family and friends. You can read the story of all this in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. But, what is at the heart of Ps 25 is a series of reflections on the nature of God and how God can restore any life that returns to him. God can bring victory out of failure. So, David started the Psalm with a prayer of trust in God and an abiding hope in the ability of God to change things for the better. And, he ended it with an affirmation of God being good and upright. In between, he massages on one side, an enduring legacy of his own misdeeds that resulted in guilt and shame with, on the other side, words of hope because of who God is.

Here's how it happened for David. In the midst of David covering up his misdeeds, God sent a preacher named Nathan who told David a story of a rich and powerful man in his kingdom who had stolen a poor man's only precious possession. Remember that David still was hiding his sins – so the king expressed indignance, "Who is that man? I'll deal with him!" Only then did Nathan pointed the finger at King David in 2 Sam 12:11, "You are the man!" Let me ask: Is there anything in your life today about which God says that to you?

After hearing the severe consequences that must come because of his sin, David confessed in 12:13: "I have sinned against the Lord." So, I must ask: Is there anything right now about which you need to say that to God?

And, then, praise God, the Bible tells us how God responds to repentance like we see in David. Do you want to hear it right now? To wrongs as serious as David's were, Nathan told him without equivocation, "The Lord has taken away your sin." One more question: Do you need to hear God say that to you today?

This is what led to David writing Ps 25. And, what made the difference is that God will always be who he says he is. God is holy and will punish sin. God is love and has found a way to forgive sinners.

Throughout this coming week, I hope you will read Psalm 25 through several times. When you do, notice how, again and again, David remembered who God is. He wrote: God is love. God is merciful. God is just (or upright). God is good. God is faithful. Read those words and remember that God still is all of those!

But, I hope you will stop and ruminate on v.11 -- For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.

I've spoken to you often about this – but, maybe this time, this truth of Scripture will come home to your heart. In v.11, David is remembering back to one of the most important passages in the lives of all his people. Moses had asked God to tell him what God's name is in Exodus 33-34. To know a person's name meant to know something deep and intimate about the person. And, this is a part of how God had made known his name. "I am the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..., and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet, I do not leave the guilty unpunished... (Ex 34:6-7)."

Throughout the entire history of God's family, people have looked again and again at those verses. We human beings are fickle and every-vacillating. But, God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Godly leaders know this – and live our lives with the awareness that, when we do what is wrong, mistreat people, use our power only for ourselves, etc. God does not let evil go unpunished. I declare that to you today. What is in your life now that you need to confess and get right with God?

But, let me also declare this to you today: if you turn to God in repentance and faith, he will forgive you. More than that, he will begin make your life useful again. That's who God is. And, God will always be who he is. The godly leader is one who grows to know more and more about God – and then we lives our lives in light of who he is. We know he is always present. We live with only one fear, i.e., displeasing him. That takes away all other fears we might face. This is the effect of a constant "God-awareness on a godly leader."

The Main Practice of a Godly Leader -- *Help me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths (v 4). Lead me in your truth and teach me (v. 5). God instructs sinners in the way...and teaches the humble (vv.5-6).*

I can only say a few words about this. So, I'll boil down what characterizes the central spiritual practice of a godly leader is this: A godly leader's life is characterized by constant prayer. As the Apostle Paul would write many centuries after King David lived: *Pray without ceasing... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thes 5:17)*. The word for "not ceasing" does not mean "non-stop". It means "constantly recurring". Those who pray like this 1) have met God personally and are growing to know what God is like. We also know 2) that God's character never changes and that he is always with us. Finally, those who pray like this 3) have surrendered our lives fully to God. God is God! I am not God; nor are you.

When this is true of us, it changes the way we use whatever influence we have. We seek to forgive as he does. We long for the best for others as God does. I know all this is aspirational. None of us are perfect yet. So, consistent with my message about the heart of a godly leader is this verse Paul wrote for a young, developing leader named Timothy – *Let everyone you influence see your progress, especially in your faith and in your understanding of God and his truth (1 Tim 4:15b-16a, Waybright version)*. I hope you see that this is a call not to try to feign perfection, but to demonstrate ongoing growth as a follower of Jesus.

Psalm 25 shows us what that kind of prayer life looks like: David demonstrated a consistent desire to conform to the Lord's will. Notice how fervently he expressed this in prayer in vv. 4-5:

- Show me your ways, O Lord;
 - Teach me your paths;
 - Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are my God!

And then there is the beautiful assurance that God will indeed answer this kind of prayer in vv. 8-9:

- The Lord instructs sinners in his ways (thank you, Lord);
 - The Lord guides the humble in what is right (may it be);
 - The Lord teaches them in his way (how much we need it).

I hope you see it. For a godly leader, knowing about God is a starting point. But, the Bible calls us to live life aware of the presence of God wherever we go. The life of a godly leader should be a way of life that flows from living daily with God. The impact of that is that we should use whatever authority or influence we have as God uses his authority in our lives, i.e., to serve others and not just please ourselves, to lift up others and not just to promote ourselves. That's the kind of pastor I long to be. I see that same heart in Pastor Jeff and all our pastoral team. I saw it last Tuesday night in a meeting of your Ministry Council, i.e., how much your spiritual leaders want to lead in God's ways and along God's paths. That's the kind of leadership that we should pray for and look for as we move into our future too.

Let's all pray to that end. Please pray for your pastoral and elected leaders here "without ceasing". If we will do that, we will find that this church will be the kind of church family that shows the world what God is like as they watch our lives together. What is the phrase for that – for showing God's way to the world? Oh yes – it will be... "to the glory of God."