

**1 Samuel 14:24-52**

**SI:** Our reading this morning is a peculiar story, so let me set the stage. When Saul was anointed king of Israel, the Lord told him through Samuel the prophet that as the new king, he was to strike the first blow for liberation of Israel from Philistines.

There was a Philistine garrison in Saul’s hometown of Gibeah.

That’s where Saul was to strike the first blow, by attacking that garrison. Doing that would take faith and courage, because it would provoke the vastly superior Philistine forces to attack. There would be a huge battle.

Who would win that battle?

The Lord didn’t tell Saul he would win, he wanted Saul to trust him, and do what he was called to do, and see what the Lord would do. See if the Lord would deliver Israel.

But Saul was not a man of faith.

He did all sorts of religious things, he talked religious talk—but out of fear or caution—he would not attack the Philistines.

His son Jonathan was a man of faith. Jonathan loved the Lord.

So he did what his father refused to do. Struck the first blow.

God honored Jonathan’s act of faith, used it to throw Philistine army into confusion.

When the enemy began to flee, Saul finally got in on the action.

Sent his men into battle, and for that whole day they chased the Philistines, ran them right out of Israel and all the way back to Philistine territory.

Verse 23 says:

“So the LORD rescued Israel that day, and the battle moved beyond Beth Aven.”

This reading is a flashback to the battle itself and the immediate aftermath.

As I read it, I want you to ask yourself what sort of judgment is being made of Saul’s leadership.

**INTRO:** Next Sunday we have our annual congregational meeting. We'll be voting on church officers.

We have two men on the ballot for deacon, two for ruling elder.

If they are elected, will take a spot on the Diaconate and the Session.

For those of you who aren't familiar with those terms.

We call our board of elders the Session.

We call our board of deacons the Diaconate.

Those are the two governing bodies of our church.

The Session leads and guides the direction and ministry of the church, oversees teaching and worship, cares for the spiritual needs of members.

The Diaconate assists the Session by caring for the physical and material needs of church members, needy people outside church, upkeep of facility.

One of the most important duties and privileges of church membership is the election of officers who will lead this congregation.

I know all of you will take that seriously next Sunday.

So, what does our church government have to do with this story?

What does Saul telling his troops not to eat and Jonathan eating honey and everything else that happened, what does that have to do with elders and deacons?

Here's the connection.

This is a story about abusive church leadership.

I certainly don't think our church officers are abusive, not at all.

But there are church officers, pastors, elders who are abusive.

And there is certainly the potential for abusive leadership in every church.

I'll explain what I mean by abuse as we go.

But the main thing is that the Holy Spirit has seen to it that this story is in the Bible.

And if we are going to be people who know the whole counsel of God, then this is a passage of Scripture and a topic we should know something about.

This is actually a fairly big theme in the Bible—abusive church leadership.

In the Gospels Jesus warns his apostles not to govern the church like political leaders do, demanding honor and submission. The Lord Jesus clearly had in mind a particular sort of leadership that would be harmful to the church.

The Apostle Paul met with the elders from the Ephesian church in Acts 20.

In that meeting he held himself up as an example of leadership.

He says to them, all the time I was with you I didn't take things from people,

I didn't use them to get things from them. Don't you dare do that either.

He says the same thing in his letter to the Thessalonians that we read earlier.

I was gentle with you. I didn't manipulate you. Pattern for leadership Paul had in mind a negative sort of leadership to avoid.

In Peter's first letter he speaks to elders and he says:

Don't lord it over those entrusted to your care.

He's envisioning the possibility of elders leading the church in a heavy-handed way that is wrong and harmful and he tells them to be careful not to do that.

In addition to these warnings from Jesus Christ and the Apostles there is the very obvious abusive leadership of the Jewish church in Jesus' day—the Pharisees and Sadducees, the priest and teachers of the law.

The Sanhedrin, which was basically the General Assembly of the Jewish church, put Jesus Christ himself on trial and persecuted the Apostles.

Someone might ask how this particular story is about church leadership.

It's about a king and a prince and soldiers.

You have to remember that Israel was the church of the OT.

Israel was the assembly of God's people.

And the king of Israel was to have a ministerial role in leading God's people.

He was to be a prototype of the Messiah in his reign.

Even though the organization of the church has changed from the OT era to the New, the principles and lessons are the same.

This story of Saul and Jonathan is a story about us and a story for us today.

And as I said, it's a vivid example and warning of abusive church leadership.

Let's look at it under two headings:

1. The characteristics of abusive church leadership
2. The prevention of abusive church leadership

## **MP#1 The characteristics of abusive church leadership**

Let's start with characteristics. What is it exactly? What does it look like?

There is a good Christian organization called Watchman Fellowship that provides research and information on cults and false teaching.

I found an article on their website titled "Spiritual Abuse" and in that article they identify five characteristics of abusive church leadership.

As I go through these, you'll be struck by how they resonate with this story.

### **First characteristic: Authoritarian**

This is actually the most distinctive feature of abusive church leadership or a spiritually abusive pastor or elder—an over-emphasis on his authority.

The emphasis is not on the moral authority of God's Word—which applies to everybody, leaders and members.

Instead, the emphasis is on submission to hierarchy or chain of command.

You are in God's will as you submit to your God-ordained leaders.

You are out of God's will if you don't.

Sometimes this is described in terms of a covering or an umbrella of protection.

You step out from under it, you even question it, and you're cursed.

Saul told his troops that they could not eat until Philistines defeated.

"Cursed be any man who eats food before evening." Cursed. That's God-talk.

You'll be cursed by God if you dare to question my command, however unreasonable, because I'm in the God-ordained position over you.

### **Second characteristic: Image Conscious**

Abusive church leaders cover up or deny mistaken judgments and character flaws.

They cultivate an image of spirituality and wisdom that is always right.

These leaders always make the right judgments, always give the right instructions.

But the same courtesy is not extended to members.

Their mistakes and flaws are exposed and reprimanded.

Their ideas are criticized and ignored.

This is just another way of reinforcing authority.

We're the spiritual ones leading the church. We've got the wisdom.

You've obviously are flawed and mistaken and ignorant.

That's Saul to a T. "No one can eat until I have avenged myself on my enemies."

He's depicting himself as the fierce warrior and savior of Israel, and covering up

his flawed and unfaithful behavior. He didn't get things started, Jonathan did.

Later when his soldiers start eating meat with blood in it, violation of Mosaic law,

Saul comes down on them. You've broken faith. He sounds so holy and perfect. Like he's the expert on the law and they have to follow him to get right with God. He never admits his role in putting them in that position. They were famished because of his foolish, legalistic order not to eat.

### **Third characteristic: Suppression of Criticism**

Let me just read you this point right out of the article by Watchman Fellowship. [Abusive church leaders] cannot allow questions, dissent, or open discussions about issues.

The person who dissents becomes the problem rather than the issue he raised. The truth about any issue is settled and handed down from the top of the hierarchy. Questioning anything is considered a challenge to authority. Thinking for oneself is suppressed by pointing out that it leads to doubts. This is portrayed as unbelief in God and His anointed leaders.

In the story you see this suppression of criticism in the fact that only one person openly criticized Saul's command. That was Jonathan. He said:

"My father has made trouble for the country. See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey. How much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been even greater?"

Legitimate criticism. In order to sound tough, Saul gives this crazy command that his soldiers can't eat anything until he is avenged. Binds under God's curse. Everybody is scared to question the wisdom of it except Jonathan.

How does Saul respond? Tries to suppress that criticism by accusing Jonathan of sinning and sentencing him to death, all under the guise of spiritual authority. Casting lots used for divine guidance. So when the lot fell on Jonathan it was a way of affirming that he was not just criticizing the king, he was criticizing God. God has spoken. How dare you question God's leader?!

### **Fourth characteristic: Perfectionism**

Abusive church leaders may formally believe and teach God's grace.

That may be their official, stated theological view.

But when it comes to practical church life they demand rigorous rule-keeping and high levels of commitment and participation in order to stay in their good graces and in God's good graces.

Failure is strongly condemned, weakness is condemned as lack of commitment, so there is really only one alternative—perfection.

So when people do fail, or when they experience spiritual exhaustion and can't continue to do it all they are labeled weak or uncommitted or even apostate.

When Saul singles Jonathan out, labels him an oath-breaker and deserving of death, Jonathan says: I merely tasted a little honey on end of my staff, now must I die?

That's how people under abusive church leaders feel. I've been faithful to church. Maybe I've dropped ball, but I'm tired. Don't you understand? You're going to criticize me and toss me away for that?

### **Fifth characteristic: Unbalanced**

Biblically unbalanced. Abusive church leaders usually have hobby horses.

It might be particular doctrines or a doctrinal system, or area of biblical morality. This becomes their primary focus, even to the exclusion of the Gospel.

And they present themselves as the only people who are getting it right. Because of this imbalance, they bind the consciences of church members in areas of Christian liberty. What do I mean by Christian liberty? Binding conscience?

God has given us his moral law in Bible, summarized in the Ten Commandments.

He has spoken clearly about what is right and what is wrong. No gray areas.

But Bible doesn't give specific instructions for every issue and life circumstance. It gives us principles, it gives us moral boundaries, it gives us wisdom, and then gives Christians the liberty to work those things out by faith. Church leaders can give counsel and opinion about specifics, but can't tell members that if they do otherwise they are in rebellion against God. To do so is to bind the conscience.

Example. Bible says believers must marry in the Lord. Black and white.

You have to marry a Christian. No options. Church leaders, pastors, elders can legitimately tell a member, if you marry this unbeliever you are sinning. But Bible doesn't say how old you have to be, or how long have to date, or anything about age disparity between spouses, or interracial marriage, it doesn't even say anything specifically about having to get your parents' permission, certainly doesn't say you have to get your pastor's permission. Your pastor can give his opinion and counsel about these other things, but he can't say—if you don't follow me in this, you aren't following God.

God commanded Saul and Israel to fight Philistines. No option. Black and white.

But then Saul added this unwise command and said that if they didn't do exactly what he said, they were cursed. Jonathan saw it for what it was. Unbalanced. So any time a church leader latches on to some specific application or some specific unessential doctrine and says—if you don't follow me, you're a cursed—it's unbalanced and abusive.

I've probably spent too much time on that, let's get to the second point . . .

### **MP#2 The prevention of abusive church leadership**

How do you prevent it? There are some obvious practical things you should do.

Be careful who you call as pastor and who you elect as officers.

It's very hard, sometimes impossible, to get some men out once they are in.

Pray for your pastor and officers that they will be humble and gentle and kind.

But what about this story? What instruction does it give?

Here's what it tells us: **Stick to Jesus and trust your sanctified spiritual instincts.**

The way God's people prevent abusive church leadership is by sticking to Jesus and trusting their sanctified spiritual instincts.

When the lot fell on Jonathan and Saul said that he must die,  
at that point the men of Israel rose up as one man and said no.

Specifically, they said:

“Should Jonathan die—he who has brought this great deliverance in Israel?

Never! As surely as the LORD lives, not one of his head will fall to the ground,  
for he did this today with God's help.”

And they backed Saul down.

Jonathan is a prototype of Jesus Christ in this passage.

Listen again to how they describe him—

He is the one who has brought great deliverance in Israel.

That's what Jesus did. He brought deliverance in Israel from sin and death.

All the great heroes in the Old Testament, like Jonathan, are foreshadowings  
and types of Jesus Christ.

They gave the Old Testament people of God a foretaste and expectation  
of the Messiah himself.

And characters like Saul, who were abusive leaders, also served a role.

They were a contrast to what the Messiah would be like, how he would rule.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble  
of heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

That doesn't sound like Saul, but it does sound like Jonathan.

So the men of Israel, these soldiers serving under Saul—

they put up with his authoritarianism, and his image consciousness,  
and his suppression of criticism, and even his perfectionistic and unbalanced  
demands—but then they realized—he's challenging our Savior.

That's when they all said—No more.

Make sure Jesus Christ and the good news of his grace and love is always first—  
first in your heart, first in your affections.

You will know when church leaders are trying to push him out of first place.

Your instincts will tell you.

There's such a thing as sanctified spiritual instincts.  
Not just instincts. Everybody has instincts, both Christians and non-Christians.  
Not just spiritual instincts. Those can be right or wrong or mushy.  
But when a person is born again and the Holy Spirit enters your mind and soul.  
So when warning bells are going to go off, listen to the Holy Spirit.

About 25 years ago there was a flush of books published on this topic of spiritual abuse. One of them was titled *Churches That Abuse*. It was written by a Christian sociologist name Ronald Enroth who did field research on the subject. I think he was a professor at Westmont College. He makes the point that abusive church leadership is not limited to whacky churches way out there on the fringes. It's not limited to cults. This is not just Jim Jones stuff.

Many of the churches he encountered in his research were evangelical churches that believed standard, orthodox Christian doctrine. He also noted that it wasn't limited to churches with a particular doctrinal system. He found abusive leadership in charismatic and non-charismatic churches. He doesn't say specifically Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic churches, but that's the implication of his research. No doctrinal system is immune. And it also occurs in churches of all sizes in both urban and rural settings. It can happen anywhere. Which makes it harder to detect.

Because people say to themselves: I know our church believes the right things. I know our pastor is doctrinally sound. What's wrong?

One of the chapters of Enroth's book starts off with a series of quotes from believers who suffered under spiritual abuse. Let me read you some.

- \*I woke up one morning and realized I had not thought of my own thoughts for three years.
- \*One of the things that has been most distressing to me is to see the way the church can discard people the way you throw an old banana peel out the window, with no apparent care for them.
- \*It happened gradually. But after four years in the campus fellowship, I realized I had been stripped of my God-given individuality.
- \*I began asking a lot of questions, and then everything got worse. I was accused of having a pattern of slander and was given my three warnings. I was told I would be disciplined if I ever talked to anyone else about my questions. I was told over and over that I was in sin.

Their sanctified spiritual instincts told them something was wrong—  
but as Enroth goes on to explain, any concerns they raised were crushed by the unassailable logic—you are challenging God's authority.  
Here's the lesson of this story—



Like the men of Israel, listen to your sanctified spiritual instincts.  
Saul could have said, probably did say, that he was God's anointed and that they better do what he said.

But even if the men of Israel couldn't answer that objection in a satisfactory way, they knew something stunk, and they said no.

This is all interesting and maybe helpful in a general way.

Maybe you can use it to help a Christian friend some day who is in a church situation like this and is trying to see through the fog.

But what about Christ Covenant?

As I already said, I don't believe our church leadership is abusive.

Of course, I would say that, I'm part of the leadership.

There is the potential for great self-deception, I don't think that's the case with us.  
On the other hand, I know our church leadership isn't immune to this.

Presbyterian church government offers some safeguards, but Sessions can be just as abusive as solo strongman pastors in independent churches.  
I can give you historical examples of Presbyterian Sessions, Presbyteries, and even General Assemblies chewing up and spitting out faithful men.

So I guess the most specific application I can give you for Christ Covenant is to emphasize what I've already said.

Stick with Jesus. Keep him first in your heart. Preach the Gospel to yourself.

Bask in his grace and love and mercy.

And trust your sanctified spiritual instincts.

If your leaders do something that stinks, like the men of Israel tell us.