

THE LORD'S KING

CORE PASSAGE: 1 SAMUEL 24:3-12,16-20

Context: Not long after Saul brought David into his royal court, Saul noticed that not only was the Lord with David, but the people admired David as well. When David, who had been put in charge of the army, returned from a battle and the women sang of his victories as greater than Saul's, the king seethed and thought, "What more can he have but the kingdom?" (1 Sam. 18:8). Saul then despised David and tried to kill him multiple times. Eventually, David—the anointed king—fled and hid in caves. In one of the caves, David had an opportunity to destroy Saul, who had attacked him without cause, but instead, he chose mercy.

Key Concept: God is merciful, so we must be too.

DAILY READINGS

- Day 1:** 1 Samuel 18–20
- Day 2:** 1 Samuel 21–22
- Day 3:** 1 Samuel 23–24
- Day 4:** 1 Samuel 25–26
- Day 5:** 1 Samuel 27–31
- Day 6:** Psalm 57



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

Though evil is done to us, we show mercy to others (1 Samuel 24:3-12).

³ When Saul came to the sheep pens along the road, a cave was there, and he went in to relieve himself. David and his men were staying in the recesses of the cave, ⁴ so they said to him, “Look, this is the day the LORD told you about: ‘I will hand your enemy over to you so you can do to him whatever you desire.’” Then David got up and secretly cut off the corner of Saul’s robe. ⁵ Afterward, David’s conscience bothered him because he had cut off the corner of Saul’s robe. ⁶ He said to his men, “As the LORD is my witness, I would never do such a thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed. I will never lift my hand against him, since he is the LORD’s anointed.” ⁷ With these words David persuaded his men, and he did not let them rise up against Saul. Then Saul left the cave and went on his way. ⁸ After that, David got up, went out of the cave, and called to Saul, “My lord the king!” When Saul looked behind him, David knelt low with his face to the ground and paid homage. ⁹ David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of people who say, ‘Look, David intends to harm you’?” ¹⁰ You can see with your own eyes that the LORD handed you over to me today in the cave. Someone advised me to kill you, but I took pity on you and said: I won’t lift my hand against my lord, since he is the LORD’s anointed. ¹¹ Look, my father! Look at the corner of your robe in my hand, for I cut it off, but I didn’t kill you. Recognize that I’ve committed no crime or rebellion. I haven’t sinned against you even though you are hunting me down to take my life. ¹² May the LORD judge between me and you, and may the LORD take vengeance on you for me, but my hand will never be against you.”

Saul Pursued David

Human beings are fickle creatures. We mess up. We are easily deceived. We allow our emotions to control us. And we are prone to wander from the will of God. In a way, Saul is a picture of us all: fickle, sinful, selfish, and emotional. Saul constantly waffled back and forth between faithfully recognizing the Lord's call on his life and desperately doing everything he can to hold onto power. In 1 Samuel 24, Saul and David's relationship had eroded. Out of paranoia and insecurity, Saul attempted to kill David on multiple occasions (1 Sam. 18–20), forcing David to flee for his life. God had not abandoned David, though. At every brush with danger, God saved David from his enemies. At the point in our story, David and those who joined him fled from Saul into the wilderness of En-gedi.

The wilderness was a dry and barren land, but it had a significant amount of livable caves and hills in which David and roughly 600 men could hide (1 Sam. 23:13). On the western shore of the Dead Sea, an En-gedi oasis existed. This is likely the spot called “Rock of the Wild Goats” in 24:2. The oasis includes a spring and a beautiful waterfall, making this area a perfect location for a hideout.

Saul, however, through a well-connected network of spies, was informed of David's whereabouts. Thus, he pursued the rebels with three thousand of Israel's fighting men. David and his skilled fighters required Saul to gather elite soldiers to hunt him down.

In pursuit of David, Saul went into a cave to “relieve himself” (literally “to cover his feet”). Though crude to modern readers, a reference to bodily functions is not unheard of in Scripture (Judg. 3:24-25). As providence

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“David knew that the unhappy king had been rejected and forsaken by ‘the Spirit of the Lord,’ and that he himself was the true bearer of the regal unction; but he will not take the law into his own hands, and still regards Saul as his ‘lord.’ He sets the example . . . of leaving God to carry out His purposes at His own time, and patiently waiting till that time comes.”¹

—Alexander
MacLaren
(1826–1910)

should have it, David and his men were hiding in this very cave. Saul—alone, unprotected, and in a very vulnerable position—was an easy target for David. His men encouraged him to take advantage of this fortuitous turn: “Look, this is the day the LORD told you about: ‘I will hand your enemy over to you so you can do to him whatever you desire’ ” (v. 4). We are not sure how long David had fled from Saul, but it could have been several years. David’s life had been upended; his wife was given to another man (1 Sam. 25:44). David was never in one place very long, and he constantly had to look over his shoulder. In the eyes of his men, the solution to his hardship was right before him. All he had to do was kill Saul, but David chose a different option.

David stealthily crept behind Saul and cut off a part of Saul’s robe. When Saul had torn Samuel’s robe, the prophet stated, “The LORD has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you” (15:28). Perhaps without understanding the deeper meaning, David cut Saul’s robe as a reminder that the Lord was tearing the kingdom away from Saul. Though he had not harmed Saul, David’s “conscience bothered him because he had cut off the corner of Saul’s robe” (24:5). This consternation compelled David to swear an oath, “As the LORD is my witness, I would never do such a thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed. I will never lift my hand against him, since he is the LORD’s anointed” (v. 6). Not only could David not take Saul’s life, he felt guilty simply cutting off a section of Saul’s robe. David did not want to do anything that would dishonor or harm the man anointed by God. Even though Saul had been rejected by God as king, David would trust the Lord

to remove the king through His own means and not through David's sword.

Why do we desire revenge when we are treated unjustly?

David Showed Mercy

Despite Saul pursuing him without cause, David vowed to never harm Saul. He showed far more mercy toward Saul than Saul had ever shown him. David also persuaded his men not to cause Saul any harm (v. 7). After Saul left the cave, David called out to him, "My lord the king!" Upon hearing his voice, Saul turned to see his foe behind him. David's esteem for the office of the king—a king who wanted him dead—was so high, he "knelt low with his face to the ground and paid homage" (v. 8). David not only showed Saul mercy by sparing his life, but he honored Saul by bowing to him. What David said next gives us a better picture of David's position.

David questioned Saul's reason for hunting him down, appealing to Saul that he meant him no harm. If indeed David wanted to hurt Saul, he could have done so in the cave, but he refrained. As a token of his restraint, David showed Saul the cut part of his robe. "Look, my father!" begged David" (v. 11). The title of father likely was an offer of respect toward Saul, but it may also indicate David's future inheritance of Saul's throne. David had "committed no crime or sin" against Saul, yet Saul sought his life. David spared Saul's life, while Saul pursued his. Then David evoked God's judgment upon Saul: "May the LORD judge between me and you, and may the LORD take vengeance on you for me, but my hand will never be against you" (v. 12).

WORD STUDY

PERSUADE:

The context of 1 Samuel 24 suggests that David's persuading of his men had more force than mere suggestion. The word *persuaded* in the Hebrew is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to mean "divide" or "torn/tore," suggesting David's words were a strong rebuke.

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD IS MERCIFUL:

Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God's withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning humanity can do nothing to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then mercy and grace would no longer be a free gift.

David would not enact vengeance against Saul, but he declared the Lord to take “vengeance” against him. How are we to resolve this seeming contradiction?

Perhaps the way to make sense of this tension is to understand why David did not want to harm Saul. David stated his reason in verse 6: He would never lift his hand against “the LORD’s anointed.” His restraint wasn’t a product of a love for Saul—though David did love Saul—it was a result of David’s reverence to the will of the Lord. At this point, David had killed many men in battle. His objection to taking Saul’s life was because of the office Saul held. God ordained Saul and anointed him king. To put it simply, his non-violent action against Saul had nothing to do with David’s love for Saul or his objection to taking life, it had everything to do with David’s love for God.

How can you show respect and honor to those whom God has placed in authority over you?

Our mercy toward others will soften hearts
(1 Samuel 24:16-20).

¹⁶ When David finished saying these things to him, Saul replied, “Is that your voice, David my son?” Then Saul wept aloud ¹⁷ and said to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you have done what is good to me though I have done what is evil to you. ¹⁸ You yourself have told me today what good you did for me: when the LORD handed me over to you, you didn’t kill me. ¹⁹ When a man finds his enemy, does he let him go unharmed? May the LORD repay you with good for what you’ve done for me today. ²⁰ Now I know for certain you will be king, and the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand.”

Saul Marveled at David’s Mercy

In realizing the mercy that David had shown him, Saul wept (v. 16) and cried out, “You are more righteous than I, for you have done what is good to me though I have done what is evil to you” (v. 17). Notice the language here! Saul acknowledged David had done good to Saul, whereas Saul had repaid David’s loyalty and service with evil. David extended mercy to Saul not on account of Saul, but out of respect and honor for the Lord. David showed undeserved compassion and mercy as an act of obedience to God. Most would completely understand if David killed Saul under such conditions, but David’s loyalty to the Lord extended beyond his present circumstances.

There are two theological truths that must be emphasized here: (1) obedience is required even when it is not convenient, and (2) the undeserved mercy and compassion David showed is a picture of the undeserved mercy and compassion God shows us.

Obedience is not something God demands only when it is easy or personally beneficial. Obedience is required even when it is hard. In fact, for the life of a believer, obedience is part of following the Lord. We are called to “walk” not in our “trespasses and sin” but in the “good works” that God called us to do (see Eph. 2:1-10).

David could have easily justified taking Saul’s life. He had more reason to than anyone; Saul was trying to kill him. Self-defense is generally accepted as a morally permissible act even if it involves taking the life of another. But Saul wasn’t just anyone. And—this point cannot be overemphasized—David did not spare Saul’s life because he liked Saul. David spared



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see how David recognized and reflected God’s mercy.

Saul's life because Saul was the divinely anointed king. In fact, David showed mercy to Saul again in 1 Samuel 26. Yes, Saul was a rejected king. Yes, he was a tyrannical king. Yes, Saul abused his power. But he was still God's chosen man. The respect shown to Saul was done directly out of obedience to the Lord. David called Saul "my lord the king" while referring to himself as a "dead dog" and a "flea" (24:14). This act of humility was not a coy attempt at feigned submission. David truly honored Saul in his heart and actions, and in turn, honored the Lord.

It is not always easy to be obedient. In fact, mankind is very good at finding convenient excuses to bypass God's commands. For example, Jesus did not tell us to love our neighbors only if our neighbors love us in return. He did not say we are to love our neighbors only if they are friendly. We are to love them without exception. It is a command without a clause. Obedience to the Lord is essentially loyalty to His will. Obedience is hard, and it doesn't always result in short term gain. In fact, sometimes obedience costs us greatly. Over the last two thousand years of church history, obedience resulted in the murder of countless followers of Jesus Christ. Men and women who were faithful and loyal to the end. The easy or convenient response would have been to compromise or disobey, but their love for the Lord and the longing for the life to come far outweighed their love of this world and material gain.

Would you characterize your mercy as a begrudging mercy or a delighting mercy? Why?

David's Mercy Points to Christ's Mercy

The mercy and compassion shown here is not something Saul earned or deserved, but it was definitely something he needed. This is a wonderful depiction of the mercy God shows us. We do not deserve God's mercy. We deserve His wrath. We cannot earn God's compassion. Yet, in His goodness, He gives it to us.

Who would have blamed David or faulted him for killing Saul? Most of us would have seen the killing as completely justified. Saul had hunted David in order to kill him and even killed a priest and his family for helping David escape (1 Sam. 22:6-23). And yet, David showed mercy. In the same way, all have sinned against God (Rom. 3:23). In our sin, we are enemies of God: living a life of disobedience and rebellion against Him. In our sin, however, God gives us mercy by offering us the free gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23). We, the recipients of this mercy, should likewise cry out in praise to the Lord, "You are more righteous than I, for you have done what is good to me though I have done what is evil to you!"

David's actions that day were a reflection of God's goodness toward us. We have been shown undeserved mercy and grace. Our very salvation is an undeserved mercy. Our acceptance into the family of God is a blessing we neither deserve nor would desire apart from God's grace.

In response to David's display of undeserved mercy, Saul blessed David. He replies, "May the LORD repay you with good for what you've done for me today" (1 Sam. 24:19). Saul then declares that David will indeed one day be king (v. 20). This is the first textual indication that Saul was aware of David's divine

GOSPEL Connection

God's mercy allowed His Son, Jesus, to die to be our Savior that we might not suffer the punishment of death for our sin.

calling. It may even explain why Saul desired David's death—if David is dead, he can't be king. Furthermore, David's response toward Saul brought a peaceful resolution to this dilemma. Saul returned home to his home in Gibeah, giving David reprieve for the time being.

In the end, David's actions brought a blessing upon his life. The life of integrity is a life that is far more blessed than a life of pursuing worldly pleasures. That is not to say those who live a life of biblical or godly integrity will experience a life of worldly success. In Luke 9:23-25, Jesus declared:

If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it. For what does it benefit someone if he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself?

There is, however, something far more precious than material or earthly trinkets. There is the surpassing joy of knowing God and enjoying His fellowship. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:7, "Everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ." Thus, for all who follow Jesus, we gain everything and lose nothing. Indeed, a call to Christ is a call to the "abundant life" (John 10:10).

How have you seen mercy soften a person's heart toward you? Toward God?

Key Concept: God is merciful, so we must be too.



HEAD

What are some ways you can remind yourself of God's mercy toward you?



HEART

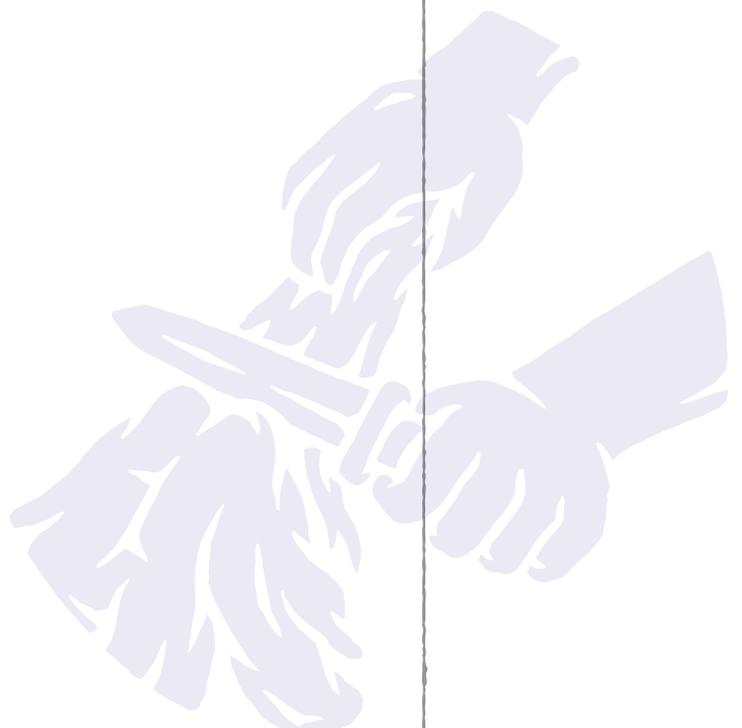
How can you grow in your trust of God when others malign or mistreat you?



HANDS

What are some ways we can show God's mercy to those who mistreat us?

Notes



References

1. Alexander MacLaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Deuteronomy–1 Samuel* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 364.