

July 4, 2021 - 1 Samuel 8-10 (select)

What do you see in the picture? Some people see a young lady. Others see an old man. Who is right? Which is true? Life is like that sometimes, isn't it? Different people can look at the same picture and see things so differently.



We see something like that in our lesson. Samuel is getting up in age. He's lived a busy, faithful life for God. Year after year, he's been traveling the country, traveling his circuit, judging cases, speaking up for God. Back home, he's made a home for God. Getting ready to retire, he looks around and sees what God has been doing - peace in the east, peace in the west, blessing at home - life led by God is good.

Not everyone saw things that way. Samuel was getting old, out of touch. Things got by him. He had set his two sons up to judge in his place down south in Beersheba. Far from father, they didn't live "like father, like son." They didn't judge "like father, like son." They didn't follow the LORD "like father, like son." Instead, they accepted bribes and twisted justice.

Imagine yourself before Samuel's sons, needing justice. But instead of justice, you get the shake down - "pay the price, grease the palm, slide the bribe if you want justice to smile on you." If you couldn't, if you wouldn't pay that price, you went home to your family without justice. If you saw that happening to you and yours again and again, how would you feel about justice and judges, Samuel's justice, God's justice?

*How would you feel if you had to "pay to play" or buy Justice's smile?*

Imagine yourself on the wrong side, not the wrong side of right and wrong, but the wrong side of the tracks - the part of town where houses and homes are broken, jobs are few, and life is hard and cruel. You're before the judge, God's judge; you're seeking justice; you and your family need justice. But what do you see? Your judge is in cahoots with the other side. When you hear the verdict, it's no surprise: it goes against you; it goes against justice, again. How do you see things? Do you see things like Samuel - "life led by God is good"?

*If time and again you found justice working against you and yours, would you feel like Samuel - "life led by God is good"?*

To make things worse, what do you hear? The Ammonites to the east, northeast, are getting ready to raid and invade.

*What external powers may be raising our stress level?*

So what do you see? Do you see things like Samuel - “life led by God is good”? Or does it look and feel like something’s wrong, something needs to change and change in a big way? It’s no surprise, is it? It’s no surprise that Samuel’s people call for a change, demand a change, demand a king to stand up for them and make life right for them. No surprise, is it?

And it’s no surprise that when Samuel hears the demands and sees the protests, it’s no surprise that Samuel feels hurt and rejected. Everything he’s worked so hard for, his life’s work, everything he prized, treasured, held dear was being called into question.

Sound familiar? It’s July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. Looking around, listening in, what do we see and hear? Flags flying, the pledging of allegiance, songs that make our hearts swell - “God Bless America,” “The Star-Spangled Banner.” We look and we listen and what do we see and hear? “Life led by God is good!”

Or maybe in looking around and listening in we see and hear the haves looking out for themselves and squeezing the have-nots, the people in power twisting laws to suit themselves, twisting justice against you and yours. It doesn’t take much looking or listening to see that, to hear that, does it?

So looking around, listening in - do you feel like Samuel - hurt, disappointed, everything you prize about your homeland called into question? Or do you feel like the crowd protesting in front of Samuel - “something’s wrong here, something needs to change!”?

*So what do you see? Do you see things like Samuel - “life led by God is good”? Or does it look and feel like something’s wrong, something needs to change and change in a big way?*

If we’re honest, honest about history, honest about today, we’ll feel some of both, won’t we? And instead of just thinking our way, feeling what we feel, seeing what we want to see, what? We might remember what Paul wrote: **“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** How could Paul think that way? How? He saw who wins in the end; he saw Jesus as Lord; and we get to be with him.

*What does Paul write about immediately after that section from Philippians 2?*

Paul's thinking doesn't come easily or naturally, does it? When we see things are the way we want them, it's natural to want to use whatever power we can to keep things the way we want them. And when we see things aren't the way we want, it's natural to use whatever power we have to change things, to make things to be the way we want.

What does our lesson show us? If we think that the power of people, the power of government, the power of law will make life right, we will be sorely disappointed - look at Samuels's sons, look at Saul and the kings after him. If we think that the key to life made right is to have power like they have power, to use power like they use power, then, again, we will be sorely disappointed. That's why the psalm-writer writes: **"Do not put your trust in princes."**

*What do we see in Samuel's sons?  
What lesson do we learn about government?*

*What do we see in Saul?  
What lesson do we learn about government?*

*What do we see in David?  
What lesson do we learn about government?*

That is not to say that there is no good in government or in having a king. God was at work in the government of Samuel and the judges before him. And for almost 400 years, God had it in his written plan to give his people the government of a king. Today in our Gospel lesson, we heard Jesus say: **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's."** Before that, we heard Paul say: **"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."**

Government is a gift from God. That is not to say that government is perfect. Food, sex, money, cannabis are all gifts from God. They can all be blessings in a good and godly life. And they can all be misused and abused, used by Satan to twist and destroy the good and godly that God wants for us. But just because Satan is at work in government doesn't mean that we get to reject all government as evil. That takes us back to that double picture, doesn't it? We have both God and Satan at work in government. Just because government is from God doesn't mean that Satan is not at work. And just because Satan is at work in government, doesn't mean that God isn't also at work.

*"Is God at work of Satan at work?" What traps are liberal-minded people especially susceptible to fall into? What traps are conservative-minded people especially susceptible to fall into?*

So how is God at work? Through government, God uses law - dos and don'ts, threats and rewards - to influence outward behavior. Why? To give us a safe place, a safe place to share Jesus so that more and more can come to know Jesus and be saved. To put it another way - God works through government to give us an outward, temporary peace, so that his church use the Gospel to share an inward, eternal peace.

You notice that I didn't say that God uses law and government to make people good and godly. Even at its best, even good and godly government with good and godly laws can't make people good and godly inside. That doesn't mean that we don't make laws to curb evil and reward good. But we recognize the limits of law and government. All the laws in the world - old laws, new laws, woke laws, anti-woke laws - all the laws in the world can't make and won't make people good and godly inside. Making people good and godly inside is the work of the church with the gospel of Jesus, because only the gospel of Jesus can make people good and godly inside.

We could talk about this all day. Let me get back to what I said a few minutes ago. If we think that the power of people, the power of government, the power of law will make life right, we will be sorely disappointed. We see that in our lesson and in the chapters to come. Good and faithful Samuel put sons in power who weren't good and faithful. Good and godly King Saul turned into wicked King Saul. Even good and godly King David had his evil days. So what do we see? Even when government is at its best, what can we expect? Sinners will sin, and government will fail.

How about that for a July 4<sup>th</sup> lesson? It's a lesson that I need to hear. Why? It's so easy to get stuck on our wins and losses in government. So easy to be like Samuel and hurt when the kind of government we prize is rejected. So easy to be like Samuel's people and demand to have "like they have." So easy to think - if they lie and cheat, then we need to lie and cheat; if they fight and bully, we need to fight and bully; if they play dirty, we need to play dirty.

We need better than that. We want better than that, don't we? God has better than that for us. A King who doesn't lie or cheat. A King more interested in giving than getting. A King more interested in the good of his people than the good of himself. A King more interested in the good of his enemies than his own good. A King more interested in winning the hearts and souls of his enemies, more interested in bringing his enemies into his family, than canceling and crushing whoever has crossed him in the past. Yes, a King willing to be crossed. A King willing to take the blame for the sins of his people, even willing to take the blame for the sins of his enemies. A King willing to give himself - in life and in death - to give life and make life right for his people. God gives us that King in Jesus. And he will give us that life - life made right - in heaven. We may not always see it, but he will see to it. Amen.

*In what ways does Christ the King trump any form of earthly government?*