A Fugitive Spares His Rival

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God's people are to trust in Him for justice and are to demonstrate grace, mercy, and kindness to all.

MAIN PASSAGES: 1 Samuel 24:1-4,8,11-17,20-22

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”¹ We love the idea of forgiveness, but when it comes to actually forgiving someone who deeply wounded us, well, that is another story altogether.

Do you see the problem here? There is a gap between what we believe and what we do. As Christians, we often celebrate and even champion certain virtues or biblical mandates, but do we live out these convictions? Do we take the steps necessary to make our visions and ideals a reality or are we more content with what we believe to remain abstract ideology? Are we in love with the idea of being Christians rather than being in love with Christ Himself and living in such a way that reflects our identity in Him?

What are some biblical commands that we might love in concept but struggle to live out?

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Group Time

Point 1: God’s chosen one refuses an opportunity to defeat a rival (1 Sam. 24:1-4).

1 When Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, “David is in the wilderness near En-gedi.” 2 So Saul took three thousand of Israel’s fit young men and went to look for David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. 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, 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.

Saul, alone, vulnerable, and unaware, was at the mercy of David. David easily could have taken Saul’s life to fulfill God’s prophecy and to ascend to Israel’s throne. God had told David that he would be king, and he desired to become king. The circumstances of Saul’s entering the cave David was hiding in seemed like a gift from God, and David’s community of fighting men saw it as such and encouraged him to end this struggle. This seemed to be God’s will, but David spared Saul’s life. Why?

What are some ways people try to determine the will of God?

Killing Saul made sense in the moment and seemed to fall into the will of God, which others affirmed. But David stayed his hand. Why? Because he refused to lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed (24:5-7). For David, this would be sinning against the God he loved. His conscience was captive to the word of God; David was unwilling to act where there was no clear command from God to do so. This was not an opportunity for God to show His faithfulness to David but for David to show his faithfulness to God.

Why must the Word of God be the final arbiter on God’s will for us?
**Point 2: God’s chosen one makes a promise to preserve a rival’s life (1 Sam. 24:8,11-15).**

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.

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. 13 As the old proverb says, ‘Wickedness comes from wicked people.’ My hand will never be against you. 14 Who has the king of Israel come after? What are you chasing after? A dead dog? A single flea? 15 May the LORD be judge and decide between you and me. May he take notice and plead my case and deliver me from you.”

Though falsely accused and in danger from Saul, David refused to act out in anger in this confrontation. David pleaded his case before Saul—he was innocent of rebellion against the king—but he rested in God’s tender care for him. David glorified God in obeying Him, in honoring the Lord’s anointed, and in his patient trust in God’s justice.

How do you tend to respond to conflict?

- With Hostility
- With Civility
- With Patient Trust in God

David demonstrated godly character in this conflict with Saul. Here we find three things worth emulating when it comes to responding to conflicts and rivalries: **David took the initiative**, **David humbled himself**, and **David refused to fight back**.

What must one believe about God to exhibit godly character in the midst of a conflict or rivalry?

**God Is Just:** God establishes standards for His moral creatures that are in accordance with His ________________, and His moral creatures will be ______________ according to those righteous standards.
Point 3: God’s chosen one makes a promise to preserve a rival’s family (1 Sam. 24:16-17,20-22).

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.

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20 “Now I know for certain you will be king, and the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand. 21 Therefore swear to me by the Lord that you will not cut off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father’s family.” 22 So David swore to Saul. Then Saul went back home, and David and his men went up to the stronghold.

David showed restraint against Saul as the Lord’s anointed, but he was under no such obligation to Saul’s family. Apart from Jonathan, Saul’s son, who shared a covenant with David (20:14-17; 23:16-18), the rest of Saul’s descendants would be potential threats to David’s monarchy. And Saul was guilty of trying to eliminate David and his future descendants. Yet David showed mercy to Saul by not taking his life and extended grace in promising to preserve his family. Truly David lived by a higher standard.

Saul didn’t deserve this ____________, but ____________ is never deserved.

David’s godly character helped him to navigate this conflict with Saul in a way that honored God, and we have much to learn from his example of extending mercy and grace to an adversary. But as good as his example was, it is not the perfect example we need. As good a king as he would be, he was not the perfect King we need. David’s example was always designed to point us to the greater David—Jesus. In all the ways that David exemplified how to handle our rivals, Jesus showed us an even better way, the way leading to our salvation by faith in Him.

[Jesus] had been given over to death unjustly, although he was omnipotent and wished to save his killers and give them life rather than to destroy them.”

–Bede (c. 673-735)

Voices from Church History

How should faith in Jesus Christ change the way we approach conflict with others?
My Mission

Because we were once enemies of God but are now His sons and daughters in Christ, we seek the welfare of all, even those who are our enemies, so that they too might become part of God’s family.

- How will you respond to the grace and forgiveness God has extended to you in Jesus Christ?
- What are some ways your group or church needs to practice godly, Christ-empowered forgiveness and conflict resolution?
- With whom are you in conflict right now that you can initiate forgiveness or ask for forgiveness as part of showing the power of the gospel?

Voices from Church History

“Love all men, even your enemies, not because they are your brethren, but that they may be your brethren.”

–Augustine (354–430)
Daily Study

Day 1: Read 1 Samuel 18:1-30

King Saul had been in quite the bind. His forces had been stuck in their tracks against the Philistines, all while listening to the giant Goliath taunting them and God. But then God provided His deliverance in the unlikely form of the shepherd David. David squared off against Goliath and defeated him soundly, giving the Israelite forces the courage to charge ahead in victory. The result was a slaughter, not of the Israelites, as it had appeared, but of the Philistines.

Saul kept David with him from that day forward, and his son Jonathan and David became close friends. It was the perfect ending to the story, a Hollywood script brought to life. Except it didn’t end there.

Word spread quickly of David’s victory over Goliath. When Saul returned from the battle in victory, the women of the land came out to greet him with singing and dancing. Only they sang a song Saul did not like: Saul had killed thousands, but David had killed tens of thousands.

In that moment, the storybook ending unraveled. Saul became furious, and from this point forward, he looked upon David not with gratitude but with jealousy.

David had bailed out Saul, but that was put aside. More importantly, David had defended the honor of God and brought Him glory, but that too was forgotten. Saul should have joined in the singing of the women’s song. He should have been grateful for God’s provision in his life. But his selfishness and pride wouldn’t let him, so his downfall would continue.

How prone are you to celebrate and be thankful for someone else, even if it comes at your expense in some way? Why?
Day 2: Read 1 Samuel 23:1-29

We see an interesting contrast between Saul and David in this chapter. Saul was growing increasingly paranoid (see 1 Sam. 22) and continued to pursue David, the hero turned fugitive. Meanwhile, we also see David in pursuit, but not of Saul in retaliation or even of safety primarily. David was in pursuit of God. When David heard the Philistines were fighting against Keilah, he went to the Lord and asked if he should go to their defense. This was not the posture of a man who was running for his life; this was the posture of a man who was running after God, the One in whose hands he had placed his life.

In fear, Saul had turned away from God in disobedience, which had brought about his downfall. Now we see that he was a man driven by his jealousy and anger. David no doubt feared Saul, but he feared God in a greater way. David’s fear of the Lord led him to seek to obey God continually at all costs, even if that cost placed himself in harm’s way. The same was true, but in a greater way, of one of David’s descendants—Jesus—who stepped into the world in full obedience to God and not only risked His life but laid it down on behalf of the very world that had rejected Him.

Do you tend to pursue God in times of fear or do you tend to turn inward instead? Why?

Day 3: Read 1 Samuel 24:1-7

It was hard to miss. David’s men saw it. Even David did. Saul had been delivered over to David and his men in what was obviously a work of God. There were numerous caves in that area. Surely God had led Saul into that specific cave for a specific purpose—for David to vanquish his opponent. But had He?

There are times when an opportunity or situation looks to be from God and we respond like David’s men in the cave: Surely this is of the Lord! But we need to be careful because the situation may not be what it seems. Sometimes a situation seems too good to be true because it is. Sometimes what appears to be a gift before us is actually a test, and sometimes what seems to be a test is actually a gift. How will we know the difference? Only by seeking the face of the Lord and trusting in His guidance in accord with His revelation and not our own perceptions.

When have you experienced something you thought was good only to discover it was not? How about the opposite? What was God doing in those situations?
Day 4: Read 1 Samuel 24:8-15

Saul and his army were chasing David and his band of men so that the rejected king of Israel could rid himself of whom he considered to be his arch-nemesis. But then, in a moment when the tables were turned and the two ended up in the same cave, David could have been the only one to walk out alive. But he refused to lift his hand against Saul. No matter how Saul was treating him, he was God’s anointed. For David to turn on Saul would require David to turn on God. That he would not do, no matter the risk.

Saul had done nothing to deserve David’s mercy and respect. He was a failed leader. He was rejected by God. He was plagued by an evil spirit and was progressively growing paranoid. Yet David understood that it was not a matter of who Saul was or what he had or had not done; it was a matter of what God had declared about Saul. We would be wise to remember this. There will be times when we disagree with others—even leaders over us—and many of those times our points of disagreement will be valid. But we can never forget our need to extend grace and mercy to others, in the same way God has extended grace and mercy to us.

How can you support and encourage those in leadership positions over you?

Day 5: Read 1 Samuel 24:16-22

David’s actions—or more precisely, his lack of action due to his great restraint—must have been shocking to Saul. What would he have done had the situation been reversed? In that moment of being confronted by David’s act of mercy, Saul experienced a moment of clarity. He recognized that God’s hand was surely on David, and he left him in peace (though this would not last; see 1 Sam. 26).

This is the power of God working in and through His people. God has called us to live counterculturally, to live differently and express the fragrance of Christ in a world permeated by the stench of sin and death. What we do—or rather, what God does through us—reinforces the truth of the gospel message we share. Does the gospel need our actions for it to be effective? By no means! But when we live in such a way that shows that the gospel is not merely academic, that it transforms us to live like Christ, we display the beauty of the message we proclaim.

In what ways is God changing you? In what ways do you see the need for Him to continue to change you?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- God’s chosen one refuses an opportunity to defeat a rival (1 Sam. 24:1-4).
- God’s chosen one makes a promise to preserve a rival’s life (1 Sam. 24:8,11-15).
- God’s chosen one makes a promise to preserve a rival’s family (1 Sam. 24:16-17,20-22).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

Have you ever received a radical display of mercy? If so, how did it affect you and the way you perceived and treated others?

What habits can we implement in order to maintain a merciful disposition toward others? What role does humility play in this?

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UNIT 10
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

UNIT 11
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5

SESSION 6

UNIT 12
SESSION 1

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SESSION 3

SESSION 4
3. Martin Luther, Luther’s Large Catechism, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, MN: The Luther Press, 1908), 44.
In this volume of *The Gospel Project*, we cover the roughly one hundred and twenty years of Israel’s heyday: the United Monarchy. After decades of the devastating cycle of sin and deliverance and being ruled by a series of judges, the Israelites called on Samuel to appoint a king for them—one like those of the nations around them. God warned His people that what they were requesting would lead to heartache and trouble, but they insisted. So, God, in His kindness, gave them what they wanted in order to teach them to trust Him.

What followed was a series of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon, each ruling for about forty years. In some ways, these kings provide us with examples to follow: the fierce determination of David not to stand for anyone impugning God’s character; the mercy and kindness David showed to a foe and his family; the wisdom of Solomon. But we also discover that each of these three men fell woefully short of being the king God’s people wanted and needed, each one proving God’s warnings true. Bookending God’s people crying out as one for a king at the start of this volume, by the time we finish, we encounter God’s people being divided into two kingdoms.

Our takeaway is clear: The hope of humanity does not rest in any human king or leader but is fixed solely and securely in the King of kings, Jesus Christ. But at the same time, we see that God delights in using His people despite their failings. God would fulfill His covenant with David, even though he committed adultery and murder. This reaffirmed the promises God had made to Abraham generations before. And though Solomon would succumb to polygamy and idolatry, God used him to build the temple, a place for God’s people to worship and be in relationship with God.

So consider as you study: What might God do through us?