

Sermon, Ch. 12, *The Path*

January 21, 2018, ECOHS

***For God alone my soul in silence waits;  
truly, my hope is in him. (Psalm 62:6)***

This morning, we begin again on our journey through *The Path*. We will read from this summary of the Bible over the next eight weeks. Today we are on Chapter 12 which covers the story of Solomon, the great king of Israel and son of David.

As I read this chapter and considered the life of Solomon, and all the details of his father's life that led to Solomon's coronation, the first word that came to my mind was "winning." Solomon won the throne over dozens of siblings and in spite of all the sins that led to his birth; and despite all the scheming that led to his coronation. Solomon won.

The story of his life is filled with winning, too. It is an impressive trajectory from new, young king to the ruler who had great wealth and who expanded the borders of the kingdom of Israel more than any other ruler. Solomon's greatest accomplishment was building the Temple in Jerusalem. It was recognized as one of the greatest wonders of the world.

People in our nation today can appreciate his story of winning. You might even say that our national culture, maybe even our national religion, is all about winning. We love sports teams and politicians and celebrities who "win" and those who do not win gradually fall away from our national consciousness. We often measure our own success by whether or not we are winning according to the rules of our culture—career, wealth, family, fitness, and so forth.

Of course there is nothing wrong with winning. Solomon did much good in his life. He was known as a wise man, writing thousands of proverbs. He was known as an artist, writing hundreds of songs. He studied nature and lectured on it. Solomon was a renaissance man. All this in addition to his long and effective rule and its legacy, especially the Temple, known as "Solomon's Temple." We want success like that in our lives, too, even if we cannot aspire to achieve on the scale of a great king.

Of course, like all stories, there is "the rest of the story." PR firms tell people all the good things about famous people and their lives, all the ways they were "winning." History, if done well and faithfully, lets us know where the cracks were in great leaders and their legacy. The same applies for us and our lives.

For Solomon, the cracks in his story are revealed in the passage we heard read from *The Path* this morning. When we hear the details, it may seem crazy to us. How can one man, even a king, have that many wives and that many concubines? This is an HBO series waiting to be

produced! Despite the craziness of this part of Solomon's life, the story reveals the deeper issues that were cracks in his legacy. They led to all sorts of problems after his reign was done. There might be some lessons for our day and our lives that we can learn and apply, too.

The sources of the cracks in Solomon's life are common issues for most of us—religion and politics. I know, those two things we are never supposed to discuss in polite society. But in Solomon's case, it is impossible not to consider them as the way he got off track in life. They had consequences not only for him but for the nation he was called to serve.

You see, Solomon's hundreds of marriages were not just about crazy excess. The text says, "Solomon had seven hundred wives, all princesses" (11:3a). His very first wife was the daughter of Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler in the world at that time. Solomon made a marriage that aligned him with the descendant of the prior oppressor of God's people.

The other six hundred and ninety-nine wives represented other nations around Israel—Moabites, Ammonites, and so forth. Each marriage agreement bound Solomon further into a web of political relationship with neighbors that opposed God and God's plan for Israel. Now in some ways, you might admire Solomon and his ability to strike a deal. Perhaps this was a wise technique to assure that Solomon would keep on winning, growing his empire, and making peace with potential adversaries.

Here is the challenge when someone makes alliances with people who do not seek their good-- and especially God's good: they are likely working to bring you down. **Faithful political life requires constant prayer and clear integrity so that we remember who we are and what matters to us.** Winning at the cost of doing what's right is a shallow and short term victory.

In Solomon's case, his political marriages led to religious confusion. What may have started out to be accommodating the religion of his wives became an acceptable alternative in how Solomon and his people would worship other gods. The king who built the glorious Temple and had received so many great blessings from God, gave up his most precious blessings—his faith and integrity—and forever compromised his legacy. After his death, the result was a divided kingdom and the ultimate defeat of Israel and Judah by foreign empires.

That is Solomon's story. It is worth reading again and reflecting on it. It might be hard for us to break down his glorious life into more bite size pieces for regular folks like us. We are not kings. We do not have hundreds of spouses as part of a grand political strategy. Our success, our winning, is much more modest, even for the greatest of us. But we still have some of the same temptations; and we can still practice some of the same safeguards so that we can avoid losing like Solomon did.

The temptation of Solomon that we might face, too, on a smaller scale, is participating in the cult of winning. It has two main sides—those of us who are winning in life and feel a sense of complacency. And those of us who are losing and feel dejected, as if our lives do not

matter. The good news we learn from Solomon—and most especially from the gospel of Jesus—is that our definition of “winning equaling success” is incomplete.

Solomon had it all—and his life and legacy were ultimately a failure. In our lives, we need to set aside winning as our standard and **seek God's standard for what a successful life is**, what true winning is. If we are able to do that, then our life will have meaning not just now, but in the legacy that follows our life; and in our ultimate judgment in the life to come.

If we are currently seeking to win in life through our career, wealth, power, fame, or any secondary standard we may use as the measurement for our success-- the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to turn aside from those lesser goals. Then we can embrace the primary goal in life that give those other parts of life true meaning—a relationship with God through our faith in Christ. Through faith in Christ, we gain a godly perspective about the success that God offers.

The psalm for today shows us the way—

For God alone my soul in silence waits;  
truly, my hope is in him. (Psalm 62:6)

These words remind us of this simple truth: **God is God—and we are not**. By following this path we are able to discover and do what matters to God as revealed in the faith of Jesus. That way brings us true success that will take different particular forms.

The practical way we follow this path is prayer. There is simply no way around it. You may find prayer hard or think it is unnecessary. You may feel you have failed at praying and given up. You may have said to yourself that prayer is not for you—you are too busy.

Instead your approach may be to go as fast as you can and let the chips fall where they may. Or your approach may be to be sly and calculating and figure out each move of your life like a chess grandmaster (Solomon probably was more like the grandmaster). But those approaches to winning, if they leave out putting God first, will always cause us to lose.

One wise person said that a busy person should pray for an hour a day; and a very busy person should pray for two hours a day. I am not sure if that is the right math; but I do know that making time for God is the key to real winning over the course of our lives; and for our legacy in this life; and for God's judgment of us in the world to come. When we take time to pray, the Spirit changes us as we consider God's Word, especially as revealed in Jesus. Constant prayer helps us to let go of our agenda and seek after God's way.

Practically, for each of us, it is vital that we learn how to pray like the psalmist describes—to wait for God alone and in silence. It may be hard for many of us to just sit in a room alone or on a mountain top all by ourselves. We have to find an approach that works for us and our personality. We have to trust the Spirit to help us learn to pray. Mother Bonnie and I can help you as you try different experiments in prayer.

You may try using a long commute-- cut off the radio and wait alone for God in prayer. You may try getting up early or staying up late— whatever works for your personality. Find a quiet time and place to pray. Whatever we do, the point is to be connecting with God through prayer. If we do, over time we will realize that God's way as revealed in Jesus challenges us and our cultural norms. Through prayer, the Spirit will redirect us in how we live and what we seek to accomplish.

If throughout our lives—and especially at the end of our earthly lives-- we can say, "My heart is with you, O God—not my will but your will be done," then we will be winning and our lives will be truly successful. Amen.