

NHPC, Overland, MO—6/10/18

TEXT: I Samuel 8: 4-22

### "God Makes a Compromise"

When I was ordained, my father preached the sermon. He began his remarks by explaining why the Catholic Church has celibate priests. Although there had been a long tradition of celibate religious leaders in the Church, it was not until the 11th century that celibacy became mandatory.

The reason was the Church owned vast amounts of property that was being inherited by the priests' oldest sons. They also often inherited the religious title of priests and sometimes even bishop, even if they were unqualified for the job.

Clerical celibacy was an economic and political reform of the church designed to take control of church property out of the hands of corrupt religious leaders. In my father's sermon at my ordination, his point was: Why would the children of clergy—like me— now go into ministry if there was no wealth to inherit?

My point this morning is somewhat different: Corruption tempts leaders of human institutions, even the Church.

The duty of church leaders is to provide spiritual guidance and social well-being to the members of the Church.

However, greed and corruption spoils this calling when religious leaders amass great wealth and pursue their own interests. Ironically, our attempts to solve this problem can often cause other difficulties.

For example, by the sixteenth century, the reforms of the 11th century had led to widespread clerical hypocrisy because some priests were openly living with women and even children.

According to one book I read several years ago, this widespread practice was one of the major reasons that some German princes were supported the Protestant Reformation. If priests were going to live openly with women, why not let them get married?

If we read our Bibles, we should not be surprised at these cycles of corruption and reform that have occurred throughout religious history. Today's Old Testament lesson is an account of Israel's demand for a king.

This request came out of a context of corruption as reported in I Samuel 8:

***When Samuel became very old, he made his sons judges over Israel... Yet his sons did not follow his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel... and said to him, "You are very old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."***  
(I Samuel 8: 1, 3-5.)

You may remember that Samuel came to power under similar circumstances. His spiritual mentor, Eli, also had corrupt sons. In a dream, God told Samuel that Eli and his corrupt family would be destroyed. Indeed, this is what happened

and then Samuel became a judge over Israel.

We see in these Old Testament stories cycles of human corruption, destruction, and reform. When the elders of Israel decided that they could no longer tolerate the corruptions of Samuel's sons, they proposed a "reform:" *"Give us a king like other nations."*

This reform, like so many others, would be a mixed blessing.

The evil and corruption of Samuel's sons would be curtailed, but the establishment of a monarchy would lead to new corruption and hardships for the Israelites. At God's behest, Samuel warned the Israelites about these potential problems, but the people still wanted a king.

Oddly enough, God relented and told Samuel to give them a king. We might say that God made a compromise. God knew that the monarchy would not end corruption and hardship in Israel. God even warned them that the evil and corruption would be worse. Nonetheless, God let them have a king.

God made a compromise:

Why would God do this? Why would God give them a king, even though it would not end the corruption? One answer seems obvious enough: No matter what the form of government there would be corruption.

The kings would become as evil as Samuel's sons. This is cynical view of human nature, but also realistic. God used this opportunity to remind Israel about the corrupt nature of human life. God let them have their king, but in the process reminded them that this reform would not end human corruption.

This is a message that we need to hear in our church and country today, especially in relationship to our leaders.

There is a strong tendency to blame our leaders for the problems of church and society. *"Throw all the bums out,"* is popular political slogan nowadays. In our presidential elections two years ago, people want new leadership. They were discouraged by all the corruption of money and influence and wanted to drain the swamp. We voted for someone new, but all we got was a deeper swamp and bigger crocodiles.

In some churches, there is also the attitude that if they could call a new, younger pastor with a family they would grow and be more prosperous. Underneath all these attitudes is the assumption that something new will be better.

Kings will be better than judges. A new pastor will inspire a congregation. A new president or prime minister will improve the economy and solve our problems.

In the end, we are always disappointed

because we have expected too much from our leaders. After all, they are frail and sinful human beings like all the rest of us.

They are prone to sin and corruption. This does not mean that all leaders are corrupt and immoral. After all, there were good kings of Israel. This also does not mean reformation of political and social organizations is unnecessary.

Indeed, reforms in church and society over the years have vastly improved human life. The point is: replacement of old leaders with new leaders does not solve the underlying problems of human sin and corruption.

Another point: The Israelites wanted a king so that they could be "like other nations."

In the church today, we are also prone to think the same way. We want our congregation to be successful like the mega churches.

We think that the church ought to be run like a business, or provide services and entertainment like other organizations in our society.

God made a compromise with Israel: God let them be like other nations, but they were warned that this will not end their problems.

God makes the same compromises with us: Maybe we can be more like successful churches or other institutions in society, but we have also been warned that this will not solve our problems. We will still

struggle with sin and corruption among leaders and members. We will still blame our leaders, for the decline of the entire church.

Our hope in the midst of all this is to remember that Jesus Christ is our king. As our king, he forgives of our sin and corruption. In order to receive this forgiveness, we must always be aware of our own sin and the inability to remove corruption from our lives.

Ironically, the more we accept both human sin and Jesus' forgiveness of sin, the more we can forgive each other and improve human life. This is a key to better human life on both church and society.

When we accept Jesus as the King who forgives our sins, we can also have more realistic expectations of our leaders so they can really lead us. Although we do not accept their corruptions, we can forgive them and then work with them to improve life.

On this foundation, we can live our lives in this world working to improve human relationships knowing that sin and corruption are only overcome by God's forgiveness.

Let us pray.

"To Jesus Christ, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever."  
AMEN.