

## GOVERNMENT LEADERS AND CHARACTER

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Johns Hopkins is generally regarded as America's first research university. I have a nephew and his wife who are employed by the institution. In 1876 the university's first president (Daniel Coit Gilman) claimed that **"everyone agreed"** that the job of the university and its faculty was **"to develop character--- to make men."** The university **"misses its aim,"** he continued, **"if it produce[s] learned pedants, or simple artisans, or cunning sophists, or pretentious practitioners."**

Prior to the Civil War, church-affiliated colleges educated 90% of the nation's undergraduates. The development of character was an important concern to these schools. After the war, state governments began to establish public colleges. Today public universities and colleges educate over 73% of American undergraduates. Religion and character development are less of a concern to them. One study found that 62% of college students never had professors who encouraged discussions of life's meaning and purpose. (*Christianity Today*, March 2012)

We have been considering the subject of "A Biblical View of Civil Government." We have seen that God is the sovereign ruler and source of all authority. We have also looked at the governed. What kind of governance do people need? We have seen that people are created in the image of God and have infinite value and worth. Civil government thus has a basic obligation to protect life from the womb to the tomb. We also saw from Genesis #3 that human beings have inherited a sin nature. We have an innate tendency to be selfish and to go astray morally. So we need policing and laws that restrain bad behavior. Civil government in turn has a responsibility to administer justice, even up to the use of capital punishment for murder.

The sinfulness of humanity also means that we should expect flawed leaders, who need to also be held accountable. Part of the beauty of our national government is that we have a system of checks and balances, involving power shared between legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

We saw last time that when God met with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai, He established a model government. In Exodus #20 and following we have a description of the Ten Commandments and the additional statutes that flow from them. These rules provide us insight into God's standards of justice.

Today we are going to consider the leaders of government. What kind of governors do we want and need? What Biblical principles can we discover which will help us to be more effective in praying for them and voting for them? For what things should we hold them accountable?

We have recently been considering the wise policies and standards which government should promote. Which is more important--- the policies which leaders promote, or the character of those leaders? Rabbis in Jesus' day, and even Jesus Himself, would often respond to a question with a question. Perhaps they might respond today to that question with this question: Which is more important--- the left wing of a plane or the right wing of a plane? The point is that both good policies and the character of the policy giver are important.

Samuel Adams (PROJECTOR ON--- SAMUEL ADAMS), one of the Founding Fathers of our nation, once observed, **"He who is void of virtuous attachments in private life is, or very soon will be, void of all regard of his country. There is seldom an instance of a man guilty of betraying his country who had not before lost the feeling of moral obligations in his private connections."** (Writings of Samuel Adams, Cushing, Vol. 1, Chapter 18, #6)

(PROVERBS 29:2) In Proverbs 29 v. 2 the Bible says, **"When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; But when the wicked rule, the people groan."** In Luke #6 vv. 43 & 44 Jesus was teaching wisdom principles in the Sermon on the Mount. (LUKE 6:43) He declared, **"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit..."** We want and need rulers with character. What kind of character do good rulers display?

I.

In 1 Samuel #8 vv. 1-18 we are going to discover that GOD APPOINTS THE FIRST HUMAN KINGS OF ISRAEL. (I. GOD APPOINTS THE FIRST...) We left off last week with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and additional laws from God at Mt. Sinai. Because the Hebrews did not trust God to defeat the Canaanites, He condemned them to spend the next forty years wandering in the wilderness until that adult generation died off. Joshua then led the Hebrews into Canaan where they proceeded to conquer the Canaanites.

That task was never fully accomplished. In the next 400 years God continued to serve as Israel's political ruler. The people tended to go astray. God would discipline them by subjecting them to enemies. When they cried out to him, he would raise up leaders who were called judges. God would use them to defeat the enemies. This cycle was repeated many times. The last of these judges was Samuel.

We are going to pick up the story in 1 Samuel #8 (p. 230 in the black Bibles). In the first five verses we read this: **"When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in 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 at Ramah and said to him, 'Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.'"**

There are three motivations which lie behind this popular request. First, Samuel is getting old. He has been a fine leader for the Hebrews, but he will soon pass from the scene. Second, Samuel's sons are lacking in character. There is no record of previous judges appointing their sons to replace them. Samuel has done that, but his sons are not good men. Third, the people want to follow the model of leadership displayed in the surrounding countries. It is always a problem when people want to adopt the standards of the world around them. In this case, when God had established the kingdom of Israel as a model nation, He made it clear that they were to function as a unique nation, and He was to be their leader.

Look at vv. 6 & 7: **“But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’ And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’”** The original plan was that God would serve as their king. They are rejecting Him and His original plan. In the last 400 years the people had often gone astray in following other gods and in not obeying God's commandments. Now they are formalizing the rejection of that original plan.

The Lord continues in vv. 8 & 9, **“According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”** The people and their leaders are accountable for making a bad decision. They are looking to human government to provide things which only God can provide. That is still a problem today. Yet the Lord will use this desire to have a king to fit into His sovereign purposes.

According to vv. 10-16, **“So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work.’”**

Along with having a human king comes a bureaucracy. This bureaucracy will include a standing army. The army will require food supplies and munitions. Thus there will be a military industrial complex. Even young women will be drafted into this system.

The bigger the bureaucracy is, the more people will have to be taxed to support it. The bigger the bureaucracy is, the more talented people will be directed into regulation and management and oversight, rather than into economic productivity and other avenues of creativity. Dictatorships typically employ lots of people to spy on others within their countries and outside of their countries.

Large national bureaucracies generally survive well, even in economic downturns. Have you heard of any federal employees being laid off as a result of the pandemic? If you have ever been to Washington, DC, you know that it is one of the most expensive places in the country to live. Any large modern nation needs bureaucracies and federal employees, but there is a cost to building bureaucracies, which is recognized in our passage.

The Lord continues in vv. 17 & 18: **“He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”**

Thus a system of taxation will be another consequence of the popular demand for a king.

There is also a hint in the wording of the Lord’s response that the people will get the kind of king which they think that they want. Saul will be that first king. He will look good on the outside. He will have a certain charisma. He will have an impressive physical appearance. He will fit the image and conception of the ideal Ancient Near Eastern king. But he will fall short of being what the Hebrews really need. In the end he will lead them to defeat at the hands of their long time enemies, the Philistines. There is a hint in v. 20 that having a king to lead them against the Philistines was one of the chief reasons that the people wanted a king.

II.

We will see next that GOD ESTABLISHES THE STANDARDS FOR KINGS WITH CHARACTER. (II. GOD ESTABLISHES THE STANDARDS...) Such is the subject of Deuteronomy #17 vv. 14-20. Four hundred years before the time of Samuel the Lord anticipated the coming of leadership of Israel by a human king. Thus we find these instructions included in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The name “Deuteronomy” means “Second Law.” This book is a restatement and further elaboration of the law given by God at Mt. Sinai. Moses presents this explanation to his people just before their entrance into the promised land and before his death.

Let’s look then at Deuteronomy #17, beginning at v. 14. (p. 161). Moses writes, **“When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.”**

Prior to the time of Samuel, the judges who functioned as leaders of Israel and who represented the Lord did not use the term “king” to describe themselves. Even Moses and Joshua did not call themselves kings. The only exception to that was Abimelech, who was the son of Gideon. He was a bad and evil leader who was never endorsed by God as His representative.

The exact mechanism by which the king was to be selected is not described, but the foundational requirement, according to these two verses, is that a legitimate king must be a Hebrew, and the Lord must do the choosing. On these two counts Herod the Great centuries later did not qualify to be king of Israel. The first century Jewish rabbis pointed out that he was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, the brother of Jacob. These rabbis, most of whom were Pharisees, refused to take an oath of loyalty to Herod. (Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 332)

According to v. 16, **“Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’”** Egypt was the main source of horses at this time and in this part of the world. Horses were a symbol of power. They were used in cavalry units and for chariots. This prohibition seems to serve as a discouragement for a large standing army. Israel’s kings were to trust in God to fight their battles. He would have creative ways to defeat Israel’s enemies without trusting in man’s resources.

Verse 17: **“And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.”** The size of a harem was regarded in the popular culture of the day as evidence of a king’s virility and power. Wives for kings were also acquired to form political alliances. We saw in Genesis #3 that God’s intention was that marriage should be a divine institution uniting one man and one woman. Civil government should protect this divine institution. Leaders of civil government with character should set an example for their people by having a good marriage and by having one wife. Sadly, the kings of Israel will mostly follow the example of pagan kings.

The personal acquisition of gold and silver was another characteristic of the kings of the Ancient Near East. Unfortunately this would also characterize most of the kings of Israel. It has been a characteristic of too many leaders of government in other nations as well.

Moses continues in vv. 18-20, **“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.”**

Here was a positive check on the behavior of Israel's kings. They were instructed to regularly read and study Deuteronomy. Notice that Israel's kings were to guard against lifting their hearts above their brothers. It was a common practice for kings in ancient history to claim the status of gods. Still today we see evidence where governing officials act as though they are superior to the people they govern. Governors and mayors throughout the country have issued orders for people to stay masked and to remain at home and to avoid interaction with people outside of their immediate family. Yet there have been many examples where these same officials violate their own rules. Perhaps the most famous example is California governor Gavin Newsome who went to a ritzy restaurant with other officials and lobbyists, none of whom were wearing masks.

The warnings to Israel's leaders about their character temptations could be categorized as power, sex, and money. In modern America we see these same temptations as problems for our governing officials. In the last week or two Governor Cuomo in New York has been charged with sexual improprieties and with covering up directives which he made to have elderly patients in hospitals suffering from covid 19 forced to be placed in nursing homes. The governor seems to be using all of the power that he can muster to stay in office and cover up these allegations.

There are many examples on the national level where our presidents have been guilty of sexual improprieties. Historians tell us that John F. Kennedy was very promiscuous. His relationships included a woman who had ties to the mafia. Bill Clinton was impeached for his affair with Monica Lewinski. President Trump has had a reputation for having relationships with many women.

Then there is the issue of money. I suspect that it is a wise and appropriate thing to pay our governing officials well. But we voters have to wonder about how people who claim to be public servants become so wealthy in office. God tells the kings of Israel in Deuteronomy not to multiply wealth for themselves. I will cite two contemporary examples of this. In 2015 Bill Clinton gave a speech in Moscow for which he was paid \$500,000. How could anyone expect to get half a million dollars for delivering a speech? On one hand, we could note that Bill Clinton was no longer president. So who cares what and how he makes money? But the problem is that his wife was running for president. At the same time the Clintons had established their own foundation. Before the election a Russian government owned company was giving \$145 million to that foundation.

Republicans have not been immune from this challenge to character either. James Chao was born in China and went to school with Jiang Zemin, who later became the President of China. Chao moved to Taiwan, where he started a shipping company. He emigrated to New York City. His shipping company grew. He chartered ships for two of Communist China's biggest shipping companies. Meanwhile, in the late 1980's, there was a Kentucky politician who was beginning to make his way up the political ladder. James Chao's daughter became a chief fundraiser for this Kentucky Republican. The whole Chao family made large donations to his campaigns. In 1993 Elaine Chao

married this Kentucky politician. In federal financial disclosure forms it was revealed that in 2008 this politician and his wife received an inheritance of between \$5 and 25 million from the Chao family. The Chao shipping company, the Foremost Group, continues to have lucrative contracts with China. Perhaps it is not so surprising that Senator Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is not known for taking a strong stand against China.

God's people should be on guard against governing officials who are corrupted by power, who use high office to enrich themselves, and who give in to sexual temptation.

III.

The next point in my outline is ISRAEL'S LEADERS FALL SHORT. (III. ISRAEL'S LEADERS FALL SHORT.) The first three kings of Israel were Saul, David, and Solomon. In our recent study of David we began by looking at King Saul. We saw that he was disobedient to the directions communicated by the Lord through Samuel. As a result, God appointed David to replace him. But Saul used all of his power in an effort to do in David. Disobedience, pride, and the misuse of power was his downfall.

God's overall evaluation of David was that he was a man after God's own heart. But his major failing happened in regard to women. He multiplied wives for himself. Most importantly, he was guilty of adultery with Bathsheba.

Solomon was David's son who replaced him on the throne. He was known in his early rule as having great wisdom. But he also multiplied wealth for himself. This was in direct violation of the admonition in Deuteronomy 17. He also multiplied wives for himself. In the end this led to real problems, because he allowed the false gods that some of these wives worshipped to have a place in his kingdom.

After Solomon there was a split in the kingdom. The northern kingdom retained the name Israel. Judah in the south was named after the dominant tribe there. Israel in the following centuries had 19 kings. All of them are labeled in the Old Testament as evil. We find a typical assessment of such kings in 2 Kings #15 vv. 27 & 28. (2 KINGS 15:27) There we read, **"In the fifty-second year of Azariah king of Judah, Pekah the son of Remaliah began to reign over Israel in Samaria, and he reigned twenty years. (1 KINGS 15:28) And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin."**

These northern kings did not just have character shortcomings like the first three kings of Israel did. They had foundational allegiance issues. They worshiped other gods. They exhibited cruel behavior. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The southern kingdom of Judah fared somewhat better. Before their exile in Babylon in 586 BC there were twenty kings, and eight of them were labeled as good. But of these eight good kings six of them did not finish well.

Uzziah, also known as Azariah, lived in the eighth century. He was typical of the good kings who did not finish well. In 2 Chronicles #26 vv. 3 & 4 (2 CHRONICLES 26:3-4) we

are told, **“Uzziah was sixteen years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jecoliah of Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah had done.”**

But then pride enters into the picture, which is a challenge to any leader. Uzziah's pride prompts him to take on priestly duties, which was never part of the responsibility expected for Israel's kings. (2 CHRONICLES 26:10) In 2 Chronicles 26 v. 10 we read, **“But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the Lord his God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.”** God struck Uzziah with leprosy, and he remained a leper until the day of his death.

The corruption of Judah's leaders, as with Israel's kings, leads to a corruption of the people as a whole. (PROJECTOR OFF) God sends prophets to warn the kings and the citizens of north and south. Israel goes into captivity first. Later the people of Judah are invaded by the Babylonians.

It is difficult to find godly leaders of character both then and now. We have learned from our study that both citizens and leaders are infected with sin. So we will never find perfect people to serve as kings and governors. Hopefully in our democracy we can find, pray for, and vote for men and women with some measure of character.

IV.

As Christians we always have reason for hope. OUR HOPE IS FOR A FUTURE LEADER OF GREAT CHARACTER. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. OUR IS FOR A FUTURE...) We desire leaders with great character on all levels of government. We can and should pray for the development and maintenance of that character in our leaders. We also need it for ourselves. We probably should not expect to have leaders with great character if we do not find it in the citizenry. That great character results from faith in the God-man Jesus who died to pay the penalty for our sins.

He is the source of our ultimate hope for leadership. For the promise of the Bible is that some day He will be the King upon the earth, and He will rule with perfect righteousness. We find promises of that in both the Old and New Testaments. One example of that in the Old Testament is Isaiah #11 (p. 575). In the first five verses of Isaiah #11 we read,

**“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.  
2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,**



**4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.**  
**5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.”**

We find a description of the future fulfillment of that Old Testament promise in the Book of Revelation in #19 vv. 11-16. (p. 1040) The Apostle John sees a vision of the return of Christ to earth. In this Second Coming Jesus Christ will come as a king. The text says, **“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”**

Jesus Christ is our model, our example, our hope, our coming king. Give us, Lord Jesus, leaders of character who will exhibit to some degree the virtues which we find in you.