

## “Thinking About One’s Character in the Dark”

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Text: 1 Samuel 24: 1 – 20, Psalm 11

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I was just walking away from the self-serve checkout machine in the store I heard a voice say, “Sir, you forgot your cash.” Sticking out of a slot of the check-out machine was \$60. I pulled out the money, gave it to the two store clerks and said, “It’s not mine. Hopefully the rightful owner will be back to claim it.” The two clerks looked at me with surprise...and I have to wonder: why would it be surprising that someone does the right thing? I guess I could have taken it but it never occurred to me. What I did was automatic, without thought. It was an expression of my character. Now, I know you’ve done things like this too. Of all the religions and schools of philosophy in the world it is Christianity and the ancient Greek philosophers that are perhaps the most concerned with the idea of virtues, like honesty. A moral virtue is a pervasive stance that influences one’s actions in each and every situation. Virtues are values that we live out, that govern how we interact with other people, leading to the good working of a good society. Virtues like honesty, respect, justice, compassion, courage, kindness. When virtues like these become so ingrained in us we call that our character. Like my experience at Home Depot virtues serve us well in straightforward situations when we act on them automatically.

In 2005 Andy Roddick was one of the world’s top tennis players. Indeed, in that year at Wimbledon he lost the finals to Roger Federer. A month earlier Roddick was the #1 seed at the Italian Open and the heavy favourite to win. One of his matches was against Fernando Verdasco, and the score was very close right up until the end. Verdasco made the last serve. The linesman called the serve out of bounds. The umpire awarded the victory to Roddick, Verdasco came to the net to congratulate the winner, the crowd cheered. But Roddick went to the umpire and told him that the ball landed in bounds. Subsequently the umpire reversed the call, suddenly presenting Verdasco with a second opportunity. Roddick lost the match, lost 10’s of thousands of dollars in prize money, but retained his sense of self and his integrity. But that is what it is like to make living by virtues the core to our being. To live by virtues means we want our character to win.

Virtues can also serve us when our situation is much more ambiguous. David’s situation in today’s story was very ambiguous. King Saul was pursuing David to kill him because Saul believed that David was a threat to his reign...that David wanted to replace Saul as king. Little did Saul know how close his pursuit had gotten. As Saul was marching along with his 3,000 soldiers he noticed a cave and thought that it would make a workable Porta-Potty. It just so happened that David was hiding in the same cave. So what should David do? God declared that David would be the next king of Israel. The prophet Samuel had anointed him as the next king. Out on the road were 3,000 soldiers intent on killing David, which David naturally wanted to avoid. And now, meters away was the very person who was threatening his life and stood in the way of claiming the kingdom. What to do? David’s men saw this as an incredible practical opportunity and they encouraged David to kill Saul now! The story is not crystal clear at this

point, but it seems that David, when he began to crawl towards Saul, was intending to kill Saul. But when he reached Saul he didn't do it. Instead, David cut away a bit of Saul's clothing. When he rejoined his comrades we find David ashamed of what he had considered doing. It seems that David while inching closer and closer to Saul was thinking deeply about what was the right thing to do. He was questioning who he going to be in this situation: the murdering usurper or the loyal subject? Loyal subject won. After, he told his men, "Saul is currently the king, currently God's anointed. Lord forbid that I should kill him." Then David did an extraordinary thing that his men probably thought was crazy! David left the cave, revealed himself to Saul, faced the 3,000 soldiers on his own, explained what happened, hoping Saul would show forth the same kind of character in turn. And Saul did. Virtue won out in David in that ambiguous situation, twice: once in not killing Saul and next in not being killed by Saul!

This story illustrates some important aspects of our human nature. As children we are reared in the idea that living out virtues is a good way to be. We are taught things like "honesty is the best policy." As these virtues become innate to our behavior we become self-possessed: we have a developed sense of right and wrong, and then we live rightly. That being said, we can never be fully prepared for the unique and ambiguous situations that do come along for us. In those situations we can struggle, finding that we have to dig deep into our personal resources to determine how best to navigate rightly the conflicting web of relationships, duties, priorities, values and opportunities. David was doing that work as he crawled through the darkness. And he was working out "who am I going to be in this situation? The murderer who can grasp the kingdom of Israel that God has already appointed to me, or be the loyal subject?" The place of struggle, for David and ourselves, is our conscience. Moral growth comes exactly when our character is tested in new situations, for it is in the midst of the ambiguities and conflicting possibilities that virtues can become solidified in our lives, or discarded. For David, crawling through the darkness physically and metaphorically (thinking about his personal character) his determination that he needed to be the loyal subject influenced his next decision to express that loyalty by presenting himself to his king and acknowledging his loyalty to Saul...willing to accept the consequence of being Saul's subject, even if it meant death.

Jon M. Huntsman was the founder and CEO of Huntsman Chemical Corporation, and Emerson Kampen wanted to buy 40% of the company. What followed was a lengthy negotiation over price. They finally settled on \$54 million. And, as Huntsman liked to do, the agreement was sealed with a handshake. That simple verbal agreement between businessmen took seven months for the lawyers to finalize the paperwork. But during that seven months the price of raw materials for Huntsman Chemical Corp. plummeted, profits skyrocketed, and the value of the company's shares jumped dramatically. One day Kampen called Huntsman. He told Huntsman that "according to my bankers 40% of Huntsman Chemical Corp. was now worth \$250 million." Kampen said, "I can't make up the full, new estimated value, but how about we split the difference?" Kampen was offering to pay Huntsman almost \$100 million more than the agreed upon price. Huntsman thought about it. When he got back to Kampen he said, "we agreed upon \$54 million and that is the amount I expect to receive." "But that's not fair to you" Kampen countered. Huntsman ended the conversation, stating, "You negotiate for your company, Emerson, and I will negotiate for mine." The sale went through for \$54 million as

initially agreed to. Huntsman, as he weighed the two options before him, considered “what is the practical business decision here” vs. “do I stand by the promise I made Kampen”? In the end, Huntsman continued self-possessed by something we probably all learned as children: “a promise is a promise.” In his autobiography Huntsman—the self-made billionaire—wrote, “ethics is all about how we meet the challenge of doing the right thing when the act will cost us more than we want to pay.” Huntsman was a devoted follower of Jesus. The business school at Utah State University was named after him, and by his death he gave away most of his wealth.

What motivated the decision David made to live by loyalty to Saul and not give into self-interest in killing him? Our story doesn't tell us. But here again, like last week, we can turn to David's psalms to glean some insight into his general thinking. And Psalm 11 is an excellent point for our reflections. In this psalm David is reflecting on the challenge to live in the ways God would have us live. In the psalm he calls this way “the foundations”. The Hebrew word here indicates the basis for the common life of God's people...the ways for living together that promote the common good. In effect David is referring to virtues...the ways to live that promote shalom (that is: harmony, wholeness, general welfare, the well-being of the society, peace). Living in this way was known as righteousness. But then David acknowledges that this foundation for society and this way of living individually is always being challenged. Those who do not live this way David calls “the wicked” and their way of life, he wrote, erodes this foundation. And he uses this analogy: they are like hunters, who fit their bows with arrows and take aim at “the upright of heart” (those of good character). And so David's appeal to the reader: Keep living out that personal character God would have us live. After all, he wrote, “if the foundations are destroyed, then what can the righteous people do?” Jesus promoted the very same idea. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, “blest are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Then in the same sermon Jesus talked about virtues: being merciful, peacemakers, meek. Have a forgiving nature. Do not let anger control your behavior. Love others, even those you count as enemies. These virtues are to make up our character and shape how we live. As Jesus taught, “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good” (Luke 6:45).

Living the virtues as individuals creates (as David said) the foundations for living together as a community. And even the tiniest of acts of expressing our Christian character can do that. Years ago, in South Africa governed by Apartheid, a 9-year-old black lad was walking along a sidewalk with his mother. A tall white man in a black suit approached them, walking in the opposite direction. Now in those days, in that situation, a black person was expected to step into the gutter to let the white person pass on the sidewalk. But this day, before the boy and his mother could step off the sidewalk, the white man did, stepping into the gutter. As they passed, the white man nodded his head and tipped his hat as a sign of respect to the black woman. The boy was astonished because THAT never happened. But his mother explained that the man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly and publicly opposed to apartheid. In that moment the boy decided “then and there” that he wanted to be an Anglican priest. But more importantly, he thought, “I want to be a true man of God like that.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu told this story when he accepted his Nobel Peace Prize, saying that this was the defining moment of his life. An incredibly simple expression of Huddleston's Christian character helped

to change a person who would help to change a country. Who knows what might change when you live out Christian virtues.

Now, David was not perfect in this way. And as we know he had quite an epic fail in his personal character! We will look at that story next week.