

What We Really Need

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First, we need to free ourselves from a delusion.

Neither Solomon, nor David, were morally upright or pure leaders by any measure.

King David famously ordered another man killed so that David could seduce his wife.

And Solomon, despite this promising start to his reign, does in fact end up using his position of power to great personal gain, growing his wealth immensely at the public expense.

Both men, in the end, are important examples of that old saying:
“absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

There are very few characters in the Bible who are simple moral exemplars. Most of the great figures in the story of our faith are, well, like us. A mix of good and bad. Well-intentioned people who seem gravitationally drawn into unethical and immoral behavior.

Nevertheless, today's story gives us a glimpse of what God values in leaders. What God hopes for in those who hold power and influence.

Today's reading begins with the death of David, and the ascension of his son Solomon to the throne.

As Solomon steps forward to serve as Israel's king, he is given the opportunity to ask God for God's blessing.

And God says: "ask me for what you need, and I will give it to you."

Solomon, a young man who has just been handed a position of unimaginable power, shows surprising maturity and restraint.

He does not ask for the death of his enemies, or the love of his people. He does not ask for a bigger palace. He does not ask for wealth or glory.

“I am but a child” Solomon confesses. “I don’t know what I am doing. Give me therefore an understanding mind, a listening heart, to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

He asks for what he really needs. Which shows great wisdom already. And great humility.

He asks God for help.

He asks God for the tools and the temperament to rule justly, and to lead the people in the ways God desires.

Give me a heart to listen. Solomon asks.

Give me a mind to listen.

And God is pleased.

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To live in this day and age is to live in a time when long-respected institutions are having their failures exposed, seemingly day after day.

This week, none was more prominent than the revelations from the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania where, yet again, widespread abuse has been exposed.

There are few things more upsetting than when religious leaders betray the trust placed in us, and harm others, especially children.

It makes me deeply sad. And it makes me quite angry.

It is important to me today to remind you all that we take the safety of children at this church very seriously.

And although I have complete confidence that every person who works with children at this church is worthy of our trust, we also follow policies that do not depend on trust alone.

No child in our church will ever be alone with any other adult who works or volunteers for this church. Our safe church policy requires that two adults will always work together when teaching or leading other programs with children and youth. Additionally, we complete criminal background checks of all people who work at our church.

We do these things because living in this world has taught us again and again that trusting others is not enough. Living in this world has taught us that positions of power and authority can change people, and make them behave in ways we can scarcely believe.

Its a lesson as old as David and Solomon.

Even the most idealistic, the most seemingly upstanding leaders, can fail us. Can betray our trust.

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Its a reason why we also do not have kings.

We have organized ourselves into society with a system of checks and balances on everyone's power. It may function imperfectly, but at a minimum it prevents the exercise of absolute power by any one individual.

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Now it is fairly easy to be suspicious of other people.

It is easy to decry to moral failings of people from other communities, or people whose political beliefs we oppose.

Harder than that would be to recognize that even the people we respect and trust the most could fail us too.

Harder still would be admitting that each of us, ourselves, is susceptible to such failing.

Which is why God is so pleased with Solomon's prayer.

It involves two things that each of us would do well to expect of our leaders, and to expect of ourselves.

Humility.

And the ability to ask for the help we truly need.

Solomon does not ask for riches, he asks for wisdom.

He does not ask to be great, he admits that he is not.

He does not ask for the love of the people, he asks for the wisdom to meet their needs.

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One of Jesus' most radical teachings was that "the one who leads should be the servant of all."

Perhaps he was remembering Solomon's prayer from the Bible stories he heard as a child.

But it was the exact opposite of what people expected.

Even Jesus' disciples were continually preoccupied with wondering which one of them was the greatest. Which of them would be in charge when Jesus was gone. Which of them would get the glory of being his right-hand-man.

Let the one among you who seeks to lead, be like the servant of all.

He said.

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Solomon asked for what he needed. Not what he wanted.

He asked for what he needed in order to take on the awesome responsibility entrusted to him.

At some point, unfortunately, he stopped seeking a listening and wise heart, and began seeking as much gold and silver as he could get his hands on, and as many wives as he could fit in his increasingly palatial home.

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There are a myriad of complicated factors that lead to people betraying trust that has been placed in them. Unraveling why people behave in the way they do is a puzzle unique to each individual.

But I think there is one key turning point that they all share.

That is the moment where, consciously or unconsciously, they begin to understand their position primarily as something to benefit themselves, rather than something meant for the service of others, and the good of all.

Sometimes we can see this happening in the open.

More often, it takes place in the mysterious recesses of the human heart.

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None of us are kings, yet each of us has positions of influence over other people. Whether it is in our family, at work, or in some role of public trust.

We all have times and places in the world where we have a choice, to use power and influence for the wider good, or to serve our own desires.

Making a prayer like Solomon's a regular part of our lives is an important part of defending ourselves against this impulse.

Ask for what you need. What you really need.

Don't decide what outcome you prefer and ask God to make it happen.

Ask God for openness to the mystery of life.

Ask God for wisdom to find a way forward in the midst of chaos.

Ask God for the courage to face what is.

Chances are if we decide what we prefer, and ask God to make it happen, or prayer will be hopeless colored by our limited perspective.

But to ask God for wisdom. For courage. For openness.

This habit of prayer invites God to be the leader of our hearts and our lives.

This habit of prayer lets us loosen our grip on the reins of our lives. Let go of a little control. And live in the freedom of God's mercy and grace.

And it will help shield us from the temptation to force our own world into the mold that serves us best.

We need to learn to be as suspicious of our own motivations as we are of the motivations of others.

And then stand before God, and before our community with great humility. Admitting all that we do not know. All that we are ill equipped to handle.

Then ask for what we need.

What we really need.