

“The Emptiness of Pragmatism”  
2 Samuel 3:1-11  
(Preached at Trinity, August 19, 2018)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. At the beginning of **Chapter 2** David has at last received the command from God to go to Hebron where he was anointed as king.  
**2 Samuel 2:4 NAU** - "Then the men of Judah came and there anointed David king over the house of Judah."
2. The kingdom did not immediately come to its fullness. That which began as a promised covenant would find its fulfillment in Christ. But even as Christ arrived His Kingdom was resisted. God's Kingdom upon this earth is always resisted.  
**Psalms 2:1-3 NAU** - "Why are the nations in an uproar And the peoples devising a vain thing? <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> "Let us tear their fetters apart And cast away their cords from us!"
3. The success of the Kingdom has never been in doubt. God established His covenant with David that his throne would be everlasting.  
**2 Samuel 7:16 NAU** - "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."  
The enemies of the Kingdom will all ultimately be subdued.  
**Psalms 110:1-2 NAS** - "The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." <sup>2</sup> The LORD will stretch forth Thy strong scepter from Zion, *saying*, "Rule in the midst of Thine enemies."
4. This resistance was on display from the very beginning of David's reign. Immediately upon the death of Saul, Abner his commander began a scheme to seize control over the kingdom. He placed Saul's son Ish-bosheth upon the throne as king over Israel.  
**2 Samuel 2:8-9 NAU** - "But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, had taken Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim. <sup>9</sup> He made him king over Gilead, over the Ashurites, over Jezreel, over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, even over all Israel."
5. As we've seen, 1 & 2 Samuel is not only a display of God's covenant promise of a Kingdom, it is also a display of the fallen condition of man.  
Abner knew that David was God's anointed king but, as I pointed out last time, he had the same heart problem that plagues us all—pride and self-love. This depravity displays itself in endless ways. It is the ultimate source of all sin. We will not submit in obedience to the reign of God.  
**Romans 8:7 NAU** - "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*"

6. Now, as we come to **Chapter 3** we find Abner's desire to put Ish-bosheth on the throne was motivated purely from his selfish desires for personal power. We now find Abner is just as willing to reject Ish-bosheth and align himself with David, as long as it advanced his personal agenda. The important thing for Abner was achieving the desired end.
  7. This is what we call pragmatism.  
Pragmatism – “the notion that meaning or worth is determined by practical consequences. If a technique or course of action has the desired effect, it is good. If it doesn't seem to work, it must be wrong. Pragmatism rejects the notion of absolute right or wrong, good and evil, truth and error.”<sup>1</sup>
  8. Pragmatism has found its way into the modern church. Churches are willing to set aside the principles of doctrinal truth as long as they achieve the results of increasing the size of their membership. Worship and the programs of the church are measured in terms of the outcome. If it has the desired effect it has to be good.
  9. Tonight I want us to see the emptiness of Abner's pragmatism. The same is true for pragmatism within the church, and within your life.
- I. Abner's pragmatism was void of the principles of truth
    - A. Abner's actions were not founded on deep-seated principles of conviction.
      1. Abner did not place Ish-bosheth upon the throne because he believed in his heart it was the right thing to do.
        - a. It wasn't because he had a deep conviction that Saul's son was the rightful heir to the throne. He wasn't stirred by principles of right and wrong.
        - b. Abner did not rise and declare, “Behold Ish-bosheth, God's chosen king—my lord, my master, my king. Long live the king!”
      2. Abner knew David was the rightful king. He knew that David was God's anointed. He knew the truth, but it didn't direct his actions.
      3. Abner's action of putting Ish-bosheth on the throne was simply the course of action that would bring about the desired result of gaining power for himself.
      4. Abner was willing to sacrifice the lives of his soldiers and begin a civil war against Judah in order to achieve his goals. For Abner, any action was justified as long as it brought about the desired results.
    - B. Abner's actions were consistent with all of fallen humanity
      1. Everyone does that which is right in his own eyes. If it works to my advantage, I'll approve it. We find it easy to justify anything as long as it serves our desires. We often hear the phrase today, “Works for me.”
      2. This is what sadly controls politics in our nation. Almost none of our politicians are seeking what is best for our nation. Few are motivated by the principles of justice and equity within the principles of God's Law. Rather, they are motivated by what will gain the greater number of votes and keep them in office. All are jockeying for the greater power. If that means making promises they cannot keep and support agendas that God condemns so be it.
      3. Instead of husbands and wives operating on the principles of God's Word their actions are motivated by what will serve to their greater advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur, John, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993) page xii.

4. Instead of parents raising their children according to Biblical principles they allow the children to run the home and then try to bribe them by providing every desire.
- C. Actions void of truth are sinful
1. When we reject God's right to rule everything we do is sinful  
**Hebrews 11:6 NAU** - "And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*"  
**James 4:17 NAU** - "Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."
  2. Even if it appears to have a positive result we lose.
    - a. A church that grows to a membership of thousands without Biblical truth is nothing.
    - b. A small church that keeps Christ at the center and teaches doctrinal truth is vastly stronger.
- II. Actions based on pragmatism are always changing
- A. In **Chapter 2** Abner determined the correct course was enthroning Ish-bosheth
1. He saw David as the enemy, a hindrance in his pursuit of power
  2. He was prepared to go to war and destroy Judah and thus solidify the kingdom in Israel
  3. Abner didn't stop there. He was busy strengthening his position  
**2 Samuel 3:6 NAU** - "It came about while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David that Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul."
    - a. In the ancient world the man who took over the harem of the deceased king could assert his claim to the throne. Abner took Rizpah, Saul's concubine.
    - b. Ish-bosheth knew clearly what this meant. It was a bold challenge to his throne. The question was not a matter of whether Abner had gone into Saul's concubine but why?  
**V. 7** - "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?"
  4. We should notice a couple things here
    - a. First, the carnal man full of pride and self-love is not prone to take rebuke. Ish-bosheth did not condemn him to death which he could have done as king. He merely lightly rebuked him.  
 So typical of Abner, he played the victim. He felt insulted. You can hear his prideful heart against any suggestion of wrongdoing.  
**2 Samuel 3:8 NAU** - "Today I show kindness to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hands of David; and yet today you charge me with a guilt concerning the woman."
    - b. Second, If Ish-bosheth was the king, it was Abner's duty to bow in honor and obedience. Abner was no more likely to submit to Ish-bosheth than he was to David. Fallen humanity despises authority and will only obey as far as it serves his personal interests.

5. Abner was now facing a dilemma. If he gave up the concubine he would lose his edge over Ish-bosheth. If he overthrew the throne of Ish-bosheth he would be left without a legitimate monarchy which would rob him of his power.

His only recourse was become a traitor and turn to David and offer him the kingdom. Abner was learning the truth of **Psalm 127**

**Psalm 127:1 NAU** - "Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it"

6. We have to understand, Abner did not turn to David because his heart had changed. He wasn't turning to David because he now felt deeply that David was the rightful king. It was still just a matter of pragmatism.

7. We'll never know how well that would have worked out.

**2 Samuel 3:27 NAU** - "Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother."

- B. When our actions are governed only by the perceived pragmatic outcome we have no ultimate standard of judgment – of right or wrong.

1. Everything becomes subjective. And what one man sees as a favorable outcome may not be favorable for another. This is the problem with partisan politics.
2. It is relativism void of any absolute truth. People cease to be principled in their behavior because they lack any objective standard.

### III. God's Word must be the standard that directs our actions

- A. Abner knew God's will

1. God's will was that David would be the king. God had spoken it. Samuel the prophet declared it. All of Israel knew it.
2. Abner's problem was not a lack of knowledge regarding God's Word. His problem was a failure to obey. His problem was exactly the same as Saul's.  
**1 Samuel 15:19 NAU** - "Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"

**1 Samuel 15:23 NAU** - "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being* king."

3. Without the clear direction of God's Word Abner was left to follow the passions of his heart – passions directed by pride and self-love. He was left to follow his own inclinations and then evaluate his actions according to the results.
4. We should note honestly here that David was not perfect in his ways. **Verses 1-5** tell us that David had six sons by six different wives and he would acquire more. This was in violation of God's law and purpose of which David would have known.

- a. The creation ordinance was clear:

**Genesis 2:18 NAU** - "Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

God said He would make "a" helper, not two or three or six.

- b. And there was a particular charge that a king should not take several wives.  
**Deuteronomy 17:14-17 NAU** - "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' <sup>15</sup> you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, *one* from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. <sup>16</sup> "Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' <sup>17</sup> "He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself."
- c. We can see that at least one of his wives was a matter of pragmatism. He took the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, presumably to make an alliance and strengthen himself politically.
- d. David's looseness with the Law of God would later crush him with Bathsheba. Although David knew sin, he was also a man of repentance. This was something Abner did not know.
- e. We'll also see that David's sons to his many wives would cause him much grief in the future. Can a man with children under the care of different women effectively train them?
- B. When our actions are governed by God's Word we have a clear course of direction
1. God directs our steps  
**Proverbs 3:5-6 KJV** - "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. <sup>6</sup> In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."
  2. The wise man evaluates his actions according to God's Word. Sometimes the outcome is not pleasing to the worldly man. History is filled with martyrs that could have avoided the flames by a simple word of denying the faith.  
**Matthew 10:32-34 NAU** - "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>33</sup> "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

**Conclusion:**

1. May Abner's hypocrisy stand as a warning to us. Our actions must not be governed by what we feel is right based upon our own desires. Our actions must be governed by what God has declared to be right, regardless of the outcome.
2. Abner pretends at the end to follow David and pursue God's will. But God will not be fooled.

John Calvin – “God cannot be fooled like men, for he is the one who searches their hearts. Now here is Abner, who protests that he is helping David take possession of the crown, as though God had never been offended by this kingdom of Ishbosheth, which he had not willed, Abner swears, ‘As God has promised it, so I will do.’ What does he mean? ‘Everything that pleases me, God will do, insofar as it pleases me.’ He demonstrates, therefore, a diabolical audacity, by presuming that God can only consent to his will, and that God must consult and agree with him.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, John, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992) page 108.