

Salute the Rank, Not the Man

Submission is probably not anyone's favourite word, at least not naturally. In Adam, we don't like to submit, and we don't want to submit. Doug Wilson uses the example of when he was about ten years old on a Saturday morning, he was feeling in a particularly good mood. "...just feeling good about myself, the human race, and the world in general. As I was lying on the living room floor reading the comics, and filled with nothing but the milk of human kindness, I soon found myself thinking, "When I'm done with the comics, I'm going to surprise my mom by cleaning up the basement." But just when I was pondering this (and feeling really good about myself), my mother walked in and said, "Doug, I'd like you to go downstairs and clean the basement." And just like that, she had wrecked everything. The milk of human kindness miraculously drained away, and in its place was a little black rain cloud of rebellious mutterings. Now think about this for a moment—why did her command wreck my day? I was going to clean the basement anyway, so she was not interrupting any special plans I had made. What was the big deal? Just this: If I had done it by myself I would not have been under any authority, and I would have gotten all sorts of brownie points for doing it. But after she had told me to do it, I would merely be obedient by doing it. And it was no fun being obedient; I wanted to be a *volunteer*. I was kicking against the very fact of being under authority.”

You will find that same moment repeated in countless ways in marriages, in businesses, in churches. We think we're submitting, but actually the authority is actually going the same direction we're going. But when they tell us to do it as a command, or worse, when they tell us to do something we weren't planning on doing, suddenly we find out that we weren't submitting. We were just coasting without interference. Submission begins at the point of disagreement, or even at the point of command.

That gets multiplied tenfold when the authority in question is unkind, insensitive, selfish, or downright wicked. Now those impulses which don't want to submit even at the best of times now find ammunition and justification in just how ungodly this authority is. We reason that we are actually being righteous by defying this ungodly authority; we are refusing to co-operate with this ungodliness.

David's life shows us just the opposite: the importance of submitting even to ungodly people. David shows us there is a way that we submit to authority even when the authority is being evil, unfair, unkind towards us. And in that, David shows us what it is to be like Christ, who did exactly the same thing.

Everyone, at some point, will be in a position of having to submit to an ungodly person. And if you have felt a kind of despair in that situation, a sort of hopelessness because of the injustice of it, this text gives enormous hope and comfort. It shows us how believers can deepen their trust in God, and find peace, by acting like Christ, under difficult, or unreasonable, or even ungodly authority.

We can split this narrative up into three moments for David. David had a temptation to rebel, a conviction to submit, and a decision to submit.

I. David's Temptation to Rebel

²⁹ Then David went up from there and dwelt in strongholds at En Gedi. (1 Samuel 24:1 Now it happened, when Saul had returned from following the Philistines, that it was told him, saying, "Take note! David *is* in the Wilderness of En Gedi." 2 Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel, and went to seek David and his men on the Rocks of the Wild Goats.

After a near-miss with death in the wilderness of Ziph, David and his men decide to head to the east to En-Gedi, by the Dead Sea. It was about 25 kilometres, probably a trip of a day through some very rugged and deserted terrain. When they arrived at En-Gedi, it would have been a true oasis. I've been to En-Gedi. It really is a little paradise nestled within the barrenness of the surrounding areas. It is a lovely place of waterfalls, rock pools, lush vegetation, and plenty of caves. It also sits at a height, where one is able to see people approaching from a distance. David and his men would have had a protected position, enough water, and plenty of caves if push came to shove.

Once again, Saul's spies tell him where David is hiding. Perhaps Saul had had some success against the Philistines. Now from that army of Israel, he chooses an elite team of three thousand men to go down to En-Gedi with him, and put an end to David once and for all. Three thousand against six hundred will be a short and swift battle.

From the elevation of En-Gedi, David's men would have seen this army of three thousand from a vast distance, and hid themselves. They apparently found a cave large and deep enough for them to all fit into and be hidden.

Saul's army begins the search.

3 So he came to the sheepfolds by the road, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to attend to his needs. (David and his men were staying in the recesses of the cave.)

In the law of Moses, there were strict rules for sanitation, and particularly for the army, as seen in Deuteronomy 23. If a soldier needed to relieve himself, he had to leave the camp, get some distance between himself and the camp, and he needed to carry a spade among his weapons to make sure excrement was properly disposed of.

So Saul is doing just that. He is away from the main body of soldiers, so that makes him more vulnerable. He doesn't have any bodyguards. So he goes into this cave, and lays aside his outer robe.

These caves are as dark as midnight if you are standing outside in the blinding sun; you can't see more than five paces within. And if you have been in that sun for some time, it will take you a good few moments to adjust to anything inside the cave. Saul goes in, and cannot see the many eyes that are on him from the recesses of the cave. On the other hand, if you've been inside the cave for some time, and look towards the entrance, you can see with perfect distinctness anything that takes place in that direction.

You can imagine the whispered excitement of David's men.

4 Then the men of David said to him, "This is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you.'" And David arose and secretly cut off a corner of Saul's robe.

You might remember in the previous chapter that Saul was certain that God had delivered David into his hands by putting him inside a fortified city. Here, David's men are certain that God has delivered Saul into their hands by placing him vulnerably into the very cave in which they're hiding. We don't know of any promise that the Lord had given to David to deliver his enemy into his hand, so this is probably the men exaggerating and distorting what God had actually said.

From their point of view, it is absolutely obvious what to do next. God has providentially separated Saul from his army, put him in a cave with all of David's men. One stroke of the sword would end all of David's troubles. One stroke of the sword and this apostate Saul would be off the throne, and David could bring the nation back to God.

It all depends on your point of view. As Swindoll said, "If you ever want to test the carnality of a person, ask him (or her) what you should do when your enemy is vulnerable. Unless they are men or women of God, they'll tell you to strike every time."

From the point of view of the men, this is the moment for revenge. It is practical, simple, and the circumstances seem to have provided an obvious, open door.

But from David's point of view, it is an opportunity to prove that his heart is pure. He had prayed in Psalm 54:1 "Save me, O God, by Your name, And vindicate me by Your strength. This was the moment God was giving him not to vault himself into the throne, but to prove his innocence to the one on the throne.

David crept up to Saul's discarded robe. He cut off a piece, and crawled back.

You can imagine the wide eyes and frantic silent gesturing when David's men see that all he did was cut off some cloth. But even though that's all he did, he still feels smitten in conscience.

II. David's Conviction to Submit

5 Now it happened afterward that David's heart troubled him because he had cut Saul's robe. 6 And he said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he *is* the anointed of the LORD." 7 So David restrained his servants with *these* words, and did not allow them to rise against Saul. And Saul got up from the cave and went on *his* way.

David hasn't harmed Saul. David's men wanted him to do much more to Saul; David feels convicted that he has done too much. But why? What's the big deal about cutting off some cloth from the robe of the man who has tried to kill you?

You see, when you walk with God, your conscience becomes aware of small details. You are bothered by the little things which others tell you to just forget about. But you know when you have done wrong and know you must make it right.

So what was wrong with cutting off part of the robe?

First, it was an act of insolent disrespect. To mutilate anyone's clothes is rude.

Second, it was an act of insubordination. Remember, the robe represented the throne, the office of being king. When Saul had torn Samuel's robe, Samuel said it was symbolic of tearing the kingdom from him. When Jonathan made a covenant with David, he gave him his royal robe. Kings would tear their robes as signs of utter dismay and despair. To cut off part of the robe was David's almost saying that the throne had been transferred to him.

And immediately David is smitten in conscience. He regrets doing this. He says to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he *is* the anointed of the LORD.

Notice the words David uses of Saul: "my master", "Yahveh's anointed" "the anointed of Yahveh". That's literally *mashiach* of the Lord, messiah, chosen one. David is calling Saul, for all his

wickedness, the man God has chosen as king. He is God's choice, by God's anointing. For David to act against Saul is to rebel against God's chain of command, which is to rebel against God.

In the military, there is a saying, "We salute the rank, not the man." By that they mean, we respect the chain of command. We submit to the office of authority, even though some of the men wearing those uniforms or holding those ranks are not worthy men themselves. But we salute the rank, not the man.

David is saying to his men, "This man is in the office of Israel's king. God has installed him. Until God removes him, he is still my king, and God's servant. I will honour God by honouring the office of the king. I will salute the rank, not the man."

The Bible tells us that only with these words did he restrain his men. You can imagine them nearly wanting to fall over David and put an end to the life of this man who had ruined their lives. It seems so obvious, so simple, so practical. But David says to them, this is not God's way. You do not rebel against the offices of authority God puts in place.

After all, David is also the Lord's anointed, and what will happen to him if his future subjects dishonour him and reject his authority?

How often the rebel fails to understand that his rebellion will come back to bite him. The rebel overthrowing the government teaches a generation of freedom fighters to be rebels. Once he is in government, he now wants all those rebels to become cooperative citizens, but he finds it doesn't work that way – the freedom fighters still want freedom from authority. The wife who dishonours and disrespects her husband finds that her children begin to copy that disrespect, and show it towards her. The man intent on splitting a church soon finds that his church split splits again, and the splinters split some more. Why? Those who cannot submit cannot lead.

The safest man to follow is the man who is himself following. The man who does not understand submission does not understand leadership.

The universe is hierarchical. It is ruled absolutely by the Triune God. Our world's ruler is the God-Man, Yeshua the Messiah. Under him are thrones, principalities, powers, rulers, dominions, princes, archangels. From the very first, God instituted the authority structure of family: with husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. He established human government, with the right to use force to punish evil and evildoers. He established authority in the church, giving the under-shepherds the right to lead the congregation as it corporately makes decisions under Christ. People who don't understand this order don't understand the DNA of the cosmos.

One of the reasons we can place all our trust in the Lord Jesus is because of how completely He submitted to his Father.

"For I have not spoken on My own *authority*; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. (Jn. 12:49)

The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own *authority*; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. (Jn. 14:10)

who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation...

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

Saul has left the cave, not realising what has happened. And once Saul is a safe distance away, but yet not fully rejoined to his army, David hurries out the cave with the piece of robe in his hand.

III. David's Decision to Submit

8 David also arose afterward, went out of the cave, and called out to Saul, saying, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed down.

9 And David said to Saul: "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Indeed David seeks your harm'? 10 "Look, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD delivered you today into my hand in the cave, and *someone* urged *me* to kill you. But *my* eye spared you, and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he *is* the LORD'S anointed.' 11 "Moreover, my father, see! Yes, see the corner of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the corner of your robe, and did not kill you, know and see that *there is* neither evil nor rebellion in my hand, and I have not sinned against you. Yet you hunt my life to take it.

12 "Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you. 13 "As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Wickedness proceeds from the wicked.' But my hand shall not be against you. 14 "After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A flea? 15 "Therefore let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand."

Notice all the ways David expresses respect for the office of king. He physically bows down, which puts him in a defenceless position. He calls Saul *my lord*, which means my master. He calls him *my father*, which was both a term of respect, and in David's case, literally true as the king's son-in-law. He calls him the Lord's anointed.

David asks the king why he is listening to certain men in his kingdom. David points out that if he had been listening to his men, Saul would now be dead. David has refused some of the voices around him, Saul should be doing the same.

He now presents the piece of robe as proof of his innocence. If David is really a rebel, a traitor, a usurper of the throne, what possible reason could he have for sparing Saul in the cave? David is innocent, but yet Saul hunts him.

Now David calls on Yahveh to judge between them, and bring justice and deliverance. But importantly, David is submitting to the truth: Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay. David will not.

David quotes a Proverb which says wickedness comes from wicked people. In one way, this shows that David is saying, what is coming out of my heart today? Conversely, and he is implying this about Saul, what is coming out of your heart?

In Israel, the term "dead dog" was an image for something worthless. David is humbling himself. He is less than a flea on a dead dog. By this he means, he has no pretensions to power, to greatness. He doesn't believe he deserves the throne, nor is he trying to persuade people that he is better than Saul.

And then he makes a second appeal, may God deliver me, and vindicate me.

What is David doing? He is saluting the rank, not the man. He understands this is a position God sets up, and it is not his place to take the man out of the position. That's God's job, not his.

David respects the office of king, though he knows the man in it is doing evil. He points that out several times. The man in the office of king is listening to lying men, he is hunting an innocent man, he is pursuing someone who is no threat to him. He implies that Saul is being wicked. But he never

says, "Because you are wicked, I will not follow you."

That's the natural escape hatch for our sinful natures. If the person in authority is evil, I don't have to follow. If the authority mistreats me, I don't have to follow. If the authority is acting unworthily of the office, I don't have to follow. But that is not what you see here. David is following, though the man is evil, and mistreating him, and abusing his position.

The ability to salute the uniform though you deeply disapprove of the man in it, is one of the most important lessons you can learn in God's universe. It is accepting God's order, God's chain of command, while understanding it takes place in a fallen universe.

Now David's submission to this evil man is not such that he will voluntarily hand himself over to be murdered by the king. He flees to save his life. And he won't join the king in overtly evil acts. But barring saving his life, and joining in sin, David submits to a very ungodly authority. He salutes the rank.

But David understands: in God's universe, the default posture of a believer is not "I won't submit until you prove that you are worthy of my submission". The default is: "I will submit until you force me to do evil or threaten my life."

These are the limited ways believers can refuse lawful authority: be it in the home, in the church, in civil life. When the authority is endangering our lives, we can flee. When the authority commands us to do evil, or forbids us from doing good, we can respectfully disobey. But in all of it, the attitude is a reluctant disobedience. Wherever we can, we salute the uniform, because God made the uniform and ranks.

Think of how the Lord Jesus submitted to Caesar's authority by paying tax to Rome. He submitted to his parents, though they knew less than He did, and didn't understand the Father's will the way He did. He submitted to Jewish Temple authority by paying the Temple tax, and going up to the yearly Festivals. He submitted to the teachers of the Law by telling people to listen to their teachings, but not their example. He submitted to the questioning of the High Priest, when the High Priest put him under oath. He submitted to Pontius Pilate.

Now we read the response by Saul, which shows just how unbalanced the man was.

16 So it was, when David had finished speaking these words to Saul, that Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. 17 Then he said to David: "You *are* more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil.

18 "And you have shown this day how you have dealt well with me; for when the LORD delivered me into your hand, you did not kill me. 19 "For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him get away safely? Therefore may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. 20 "And now I know indeed that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. 21 "Therefore swear now to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name from my father's house." 22 So David swore to Saul. And Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

There are three possible levels of life: the human level, where we return good for good and evil for evil, the demonic level where we return evil for good, and the divine level, where we return good for evil. Saul is operating at the demonic level, returning evil for good. David's men want David to operate at the human level, and return evil for evil. But even Saul recognises that David is operating at the divine level, returning good for evil.

Because of that, for these brief moments, even Saul can see that David is the true king of Israel, a worthier man than he. And so while he is seeing clearly, he asks David to vow that he will not hunt down Saul's descendants once he is king. David vows, and he does not do so. Saul's descendants die by their own hand, in battle, in a later civil war, and as penalty for killing the Gibeonites.

One of the best signs that you are in Christ is that you recognise authority as a good thing, as part of God's good order. A person in Christ is not looking for reasons to not submit, but finding ways to receive and welcome authority when it is present. Authority, even the flawed and ungodly kind is still the opposite of anarchy. And anarchy is Satan's playground, a demonic paradise.

What authorities in your life are you tempted to throw off, because the people are acting foolishly, unreasonably, or even wickedly? To be like Christ is to salute the uniform. Children, salute the uniform of parents. Wives, salute the uniform of husbands. Church members, salute the uniform of elders. Citizens, salute the uniform of government. Only when they command us to do evil will we, in postures of respect, say, "We cannot obey." Only when they endanger our lives, will we flee. In so doing, as Peter says, put to silence the ignorance of foolish men--¹⁶ as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. (1 Pet. 2:15-16)