

Sermon Series: Insights for Living from the Old Testament
Sermon IV: “Does Character Matter?”

Text: Romans 12:1-3; II Samuel 12:1-14

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But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David...II Samuel 12:1a

Some of you might remember the famous phrase of the 1992 presidential election, a phrase attributed to James Carville, a phrase that supposedly won the election for Bill Clinton over George Herbert Walker Bush. Remember it? “It’s the economy, stupid!” (1) Given the current state of affairs in the economic life of our nation, one could make a similar case for the 2008 presidential election, that it is all about the economy. The alarming events on Wall Street these past two weeks have led our government to consider a bailout of almost \$1 trillion. Actually this morning’s headlines say that the vote in Congress might take place this very day. The crisis on Wall Street at this magnitude comes after Merrill Lynch, founded in the Woodrow Wilson administration, agreed to be bought out for a bargain basement price, while Lehman Brothers, which dates back to John Tyler’s presidency, simply collapsed, collapsed along with the dreams and plans of millions of Americans who have worked hard and saved and who have had nothing to do with the overreaching greed and public lassitude that has gotten our nation’s economy into this mess. (2) On the news one night last week, an 83-year-old retiree was interviewed as she paused during a hand of bridge at the retirement center where she lives. When she was asked about the effect of the deteriorating economy on her, she said, “I’m losing so much, I’m beginning to think that the best thing for me to do is not to live much longer.”

The economy is making many throats dry with anxiety these days, but I agree with Jim Wallis, author of a book entitled *God’s Politics* and a very insightful commentator on current affairs, that the issue is deeper than the economy. It is the morality, or lack thereof, that lies behind the whole situation. Venerable economist Robert Samuelson says, “Greed and fear, which routinely govern most financial markets, have seeded this global crisis. Short-term rewards blinded those at the top of the economy to the long-term dangers.” (3)

Weeks before the current crisis, I chose the text this morning to conclude our fall sermon series on passages from the Old Testament. The story of King David and Bathsheba is a morality tale of the first order. In fact, it is a morality tale within a morality tale. There is the story of David and Uriah, and Nathan and Bathsheba;

and then there's the story of the rich man and the poor man, and the lamb that was slain. The story sheds a great deal of light on the predicament at hand, but before we dig into it, a word or two to set the tone.

A pastor always skates on thin ice when the subject is morality. No one wants to be judged or preached at. I agree with Martin Luther, who wrote that "the last bastion of sin is morality." In other words, it is usually when we are feeling especially good and self-righteous that we fall into that mother of all sins, which is the sin of pride. Let me say then at the outset that all human beings are under the power of sin, as are all financial systems. If our lives are, on balance, more pleasing to God than less, it is due, as our scripture from Romans indicates, not to our own goodness but to the mercies of God at work in us, melding our character with the character of the living and faultless Lord Jesus. (4) None of us "should think more highly of ourselves that we ought to think." And yet...here comes a very big "nevertheless". Nevertheless, morality really does matter. Ethical behavior is the glue that holds an individual together. It is the glue that holds our society together, maintaining order, keeping us in a right relationship with the material world, with God, and with one another. A few decades ago, we talked about situational ethics, and when you think back to that, there seemed to be then at least some parameters beyond which people ought not to go, lest they drown in the deep waters of self-deceit and self-destruction. I was reminded recently of an old *New Yorker* cartoon that showed a witness taking an oath before a judge. The court clerk asks, "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as you see it?" (5)

I have no way of knowing why each of you came to church today, but I imagine you're here because you are trying to keep straight about whose world it is we live in, what moral laws are operative in it, and to whom are we answerable for the way we live. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we live our lives in the presence of, and under the authority of God. In church, we remember that what matters most is what God thinks of us. As one Reformed theologian puts it, "Ethics or the life of holiness is one of the central motifs of our reformed heritage." Whatever else Presbyterians might be, we are concerned with morality. (6) Nothing is worse than moralizing. We all hate that, but I have come to the conclusion that at least one thing is worse than moralizing, and that is the denial of any kind of moral standard whatsoever. Who is going to look at our current economic situation through the lens of ethics, if the church of Jesus Christ does not lead the way? We must take the great affirmations of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the Christian Scriptures, and look at the situation, look for solutions to the situation, in light of principles that are ageless. It is our privilege and our responsibility both to live with integrity and to advocate for integrity in every aspect of society and culture. It is our job. Jesus identified our job description with a very mundane metaphor. He said, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor, what in the world good are you?" Jesus, the great master teacher of the ethical life, summed up the high ground of every great world religion when he said, "In every thing do unto others as you would

have them do to you, for this is the summary of the law and the prophets and everything I have had to teach.” There is no world religion of any stature that does not have this basic principle at its core. There is no world religion that urges accumulation, uncaring, and self-centeredness as its principles of virtue. Only in those places where consumerism and materialism are worshiped as gods does greed rise to the level of creed.

Perhaps the falling-in of the financial roof will wake us up, and make us mad, and get us going, so that we will stop tolerating what is wrong, and demand that it be fixed, not doing it in a self-righteous way, but offering ourselves and our energies and our great moral tradition to the enterprise. In business and in government, for too long, we have observed cheating and lying and cutting corners and then said, “Well, that’s just the way it is.” In God’s moral universe that is not the way it is.

That is the lesson that David the king and his entire nation learned the hard way a long time ago. What was David’s moral problem? Overreaching desire, which manifests itself in all sorts of ways. For David, it was overreaching sexual desire. It was power out of control, power that destroyed the family of one of his most trusted warriors and visited hardship on countless people, including the citizens of the nation God had entrusted to his care.

You know how the story went: David, the victorious public figure, had come to the conclusion that he was no longer bound by the ethical standards that mere mortals are bound by. He could use people as he pleased. The sight of Bathsheba pleased him, so he sent some of his people to fetch her. She, of course, had no choice in the matter. She became pregnant, which left David in a fix, so he arranged for Uriah to be brought home from the front where he was fighting, to attend a party at the palace. Afterward, he was expected to go home and spend the night with Bathsheba, and then the case could be made that Uriah was the father of the baby that Bathsheba was carrying. Unfortunately, Uriah was too honorable for that. He said, “I can’t go to my house while my men, my comrades, are camping out there in the open field.” His honor sealed his death sentence. Uriah was sent out to battle, put on the front line, and soon he was dead. David? His hands were clean. Hard to trace anything back to David. I suspect we will see a whole parade of “my hands are clean” people in the months to come. When they are not protesting innocence, they will be making sure that evidence of fraud in the mortgage fiasco and all the other places – that the evidence is in the shredder.

When Bathsheba had finished mourning her husband, her husband that she loved, David brought her to the house and expected to live happily ever after. Whew! He had gotten away with it! But he had not gotten away with it. The prophet Nathan is sent to David from the Lord. The thing that he has done has displeased the Lord. Isn’t it true that people can be admirable in one phase of their lives, and then they lose themselves and do dishonorable things? No one is

immune from downward turns in character, not pastors, not politicians, not even apostles. Judas is one who comes to mind.

Nathan tells David about the rich man and the poor man, and the poor man's lamb which was taken to feed the wayfarer, so the rich man would not have to slaughter one of his many sheep. When David hears what's happened, he's indignant. His intrinsic sense of justice has obviously not been destroyed. He is astonished when the prophet says, "You are the one who did it. You were callous; you were concerned with only your things and how much you could keep for yourself." Innocent people suffered terribly: Uriah, the lamb who was slain, Bathsheba, the life she wanted to live, destroyed. There will be more to come. The sons of David live dishonorable lives and come to terrible ends.

I admire David for saying when he is caught flat out, "I am guilty." He didn't say, "Mistakes were made." He said, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." The Lord was merciful; he forgave David. Nathan, believe it or not, became David's closest adviser for the rest of his term in office. One might wish that more of our leaders had more advisers who would tell them the truth, rather than what they - the leaders - want to hear.

God's forgiveness did not wipe away the consequences of David's misuse of power. His actions will have repercussions. The prophet Nathan puts it starkly: "The sword will never depart from your house."

There is a moral tilt to this universe that God created. Any time people in positions of authority and power put personal interest over public interest, there will be consequences, both personal and public. Usually, the first to suffer are the innocent. I have devoted much of my ministry to advocating for the least, the lost, and the left-out in our society. I have observed over the past 30 years that the poor are affected by a bad economy before anyone else. I'm a good capitalist. I believe that a rising tide does float all boats, but sadly the reverse is also true. A sinking tide leaves the poor and the struggling high, dry, and stranded.

It is a challenge to apply Biblical ethics to current calamities. Some do it in a mean-spirited way. Others fail to take into account the distance between the world of the Bible and in the world in which we live. But I am telling you, the Bible is a shining light on this current situation. All across its pages, you find concern for the common good. Societies who neglect the needs of the widow and the orphan and the alien are always doomed to failure. The story of the Good Samaritan is the ethical mountain top of the New Testament. Religious people who turn their backs and withdraw from the concerns of the world and into sanctuaries of comfort are always called to task. Those whose self-aggrandizement causes misfortune to others sooner or later will pay.

Someone has said that character is what you have at three in the morning, when you're alone in the dark. (6) What time is it for the United States of America? I would suggest it's about three o'clock in the morning. The good, the bad, and the

“badly needs changing” are glaringly apparent. Yet, I am hopeful. I have the sense that we are readier than we have been in a long time to wake up and to look the truth squarely in the eye. Senator Obama and Senator McCain are busy debating whether America’s image in the world is or is not in decline. I wish I could remind them of the wisdom of Thomas à Kempis: “Whether one speaks well of you or ill of you, you are what you are.” It is our real character that matters, not our puffed up, cleaned up, public relations selves, but our real selves. When it is three in the morning, it’s time for sober judgment, to think about our own personal character. We cannot expect to have a nation that is more generous than we are, that is more ethical than you and I are. It’s time to think about our own and our nation’s character, to claim the good, of which there is a great deal, to offer up to the mercies of God all the stuff that just has to go. May we present our bodies, that is, our whole selves, as a living sacrifice to God, who does not expect us to be superhuman, but only honorably human, to the glory of God’s holy name.

(1) E-mail from *Sojourners*, 9/18/08.

(2) *New York Times*, 9/21/08.

(3) *Ibid.*, *Sojourners*.

(4) Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007.

(5) Joseph B. Mullin, “The Christian Lives with Truth,” First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC.

(6) John Leith, *An Introduction to Reformed Theology*, John Knox Press, P. 76.