

The King We Need

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

David Sunday November 1, 2020



Please open your Bibles to God's Word in Deuteronomy 17. We're gathered in God's presence. May His Word be our rule, His Holy Spirit our Teacher and His greater glory our supreme concern as we read and hear His Word proclaimed the morning. Let's read verses 14-20 and worship God together:

¹⁴ "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations around me,' ¹⁵ you are to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. Appoint a king from your brothers. You are not to set a foreigner over you, or one who is not of your people. ¹⁶ However, he must not acquire many horses for himself or send the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the LORD has told you, 'You are never to go back that way again.' ¹⁷ He must not acquire many wives for himself so that his heart won't go astray. He must not acquire very large amounts of silver and gold for himself. ¹⁸ When he is seated on his royal throne, he is to write a copy of this instruction for himself on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ It is to remain with him, and he is to read from it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes. ²⁰ Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel.

This is God's Word. Thank Him for it.

In just two more days, it will all be over. Election 2020 will be in the rear-view mirror—or maybe it won't quite yet. I'm sure you're really glad for the extra hour of sleep we got last night because you're probably going to need it a couple nights from now as we wait for the results.

When it comes to politics, I am not indifferent. I was one of those kids who loved to sit in on adult conversations to hear what they were saying. One of my first political memories comes in 1976. I was six years old and we were at my Grandma's apartment. My dad and Great-Grandma were sitting around the table debating the relative merits of Gerald Ford versus Jimmy Carter. Four years later, in fifth grade, I canvased my school playground to find out who was supporting Carter and who was supporting Reagan.

Then in junior high, a group of students from our student council had the privilege of going to the Wisconsin state capital and meet with the governor and lobby for some issue of concern to students. Then in ninth grade I went to Milwaukee for the big, huge political rally for the 1984 presidential election.

So I grew up with an enthusiastic interest in politics. As I've gotten older, I'm sometimes frustrated and fed up with politics. There have been times when I've said, "I'm not going to care about this any longer. I'm going to disengage." Then every four years, I get sucked back in. When I'm not frustrated, it's probably good that I keep caring about what's happening politically in our nation and around the world.

There's nothing wrong with politics in itself. Politics is the art or science of governing people. It's how groups of people make decisions about their life together and what will serve the common good. So I encourage you, church, to engage in politics with a Christian conscience. Let what you know about God and His vision for the world inform your vote as best you can. More importantly, let it inform how you pray for your neighbors. We need to love our neighbors and love our nation during this time by praying earnestly.

In our democracy, we have the privilege of voting every two years, but at the throne of grace we have the privilege to boldly present our requests to God at all times. What we do in prayer is eternally more consequential than what we do in the polling place. That's why we've always been committed to praying for our leaders here in this church. We prayed for President Obama, we've prayed for President Trump, and we will pray for whomever occupies the halls of power in our federal, state and local governments in the future. We need to pray as God's people for our leaders.

In our passage today, God gives His people some very clear guidelines for how they should think of political power in their nation. We're going to learn three principles from this text about politics and leadership. You can apply these not only to how you think about the leadership of our nation, but also to the opportunities God may be giving you to exercise leadership in your family, neighborhood, workplace or in our church.

1. Political passion is perilous.

As I've said, God's people should care about politics, but we have to temper our passions when it comes to politics because political passion can easily displace our passion for God. That's why it's perilous. We hear a warning of this in verses 14-15. Verse 14 says, "*When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations around me.'*"

Let me give you an easy-to-memorize definition of the Kingdom of God, because we've got to have a working definition of what the Kingdom of God is in order to understand this passage. Graeme Goldsworthy defines it this way:

God's Kingdom = God's people
living in God's place
under God's rule.

Here in Deuteronomy, God's people are poised to enter God's place. They're about to go into the land the Lord their God is giving them to take possession and live in. It's a gracious gift from God. They're also learning to live under God's rule. That's what this whole book is about. God is entering into a covenant with Israel and will be their God and they will be His people. He's showing them what it means to live as His people under His rule so that they will be blessed in the land.

God knows one day these people are going to want a human king. That desire in itself is not necessarily sinful. God gives His people permission to seek a king. There is however an ominous tone to their determination to find a king that we see in verse 14: "*...like all the nations around me.*" That is a warning sign. Red lights should be blinking on our dashboards when we see that phrase.

God has just delivered His people from 400 years of bondage under an Egyptian king. He's been warning His people over and over again in Deuteronomy that they are not to be like all the other nations. They are to be a holy people, unlike the Canaanites who are surrounding them. This desire to find a king like all the other nations is going to be a snare for God's people. Hundreds of years later—when God's people demand a king—Samuel is going to warn them that their passion for a king is a rejection of God and they will live to regret the day they demanded a king. You can read about that in 1 Samuel 8.

In this passage it's clear that God is going to concede to Israel's desire for a king, but with this concession come some very clear directions.

- First, God instructs His people that they must only appoint a king who has been chosen by God. We see that at the beginning of verse 15. *“You are to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses...”* In other words, this was not to be done by human initiative or popular demand. They needed to wait upon the Lord and trust in His provision.
- Secondly, God required that their king be appointed from among their brothers, not from a foreign nation. We see that in the second part of verse 15. This was not xenophobic; God was not against the other nations. What God wanted was for Israel to be a holy people, so they would be a light to the world and a source of blessing to the nations. If they chose a king to rule over them from the other nations, that king would have a corrupting influence over God’s people, leading them away from the worship of the living God into the worship of idols. That’s why God gives them these important instructions.

Now, what can we learn from this as Christians today? We should be warned from this that we too can become so preoccupied with political passions that we lose sight of the One Who is really sovereign over us. We can become obsessed with the things the nations of the world seek after. We need to remember what our King Jesus told us in Matthew 6:25. He said, “Don’t worry. Don’t say, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” Maybe today Jesus would add, “Or who will be elected on November 3rd?”

In Matthew 6:32-33 He says, *“For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.”* We are to be seeking God’s Kingdom and righteousness; He’s going to take care of everything else we need. Verse 34 goes on to say, *“Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”*

This is a really important reminder for us right now. According to 1 Peter 2:9-10, we are God’s people. “Once we were not His people, but now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.” We are not to fret and become obsessed over the things the nations seek after. “We are a chosen race. We are a royal priesthood. We, the people of God, are a holy nation, a people for His own possession.” Why? So that we may proclaim the praises of Him Who “brought us out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

That’s why we’re here. We are God’s people, living in God’s place. Do you know that Illinois is God’s place? The Fox Valley is God’s place. God’s place is not limited to a slice of land in the Middle East any longer. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to King Jesus. So wherever we live as His people—whether it’s in America, Europe, Asia or Africa—we are living under the dominion of our King Jesus.

Friends, we need to be encouraged that our great Leader, our King, is not running for office this week. Our Christ is going to be sovereign next Sunday, the Sunday after and a thousand Sundays from now—no matter who gets elected in the meantime. My hope about the prospects of Christ’s Kingdom in America is not going to be greater or lesser depending on which party is in control of our government, because the Kingdom of Christ has prospered in all kinds of conditions.

Yes, I care about this election. There are certain outcomes I don’t want to see for our nation. But I need to temper my political passions with faith that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not bound by an election. We don’t need political rulers to favor us as God’s people in order for the church to flourish in the mission our King has given to us.

Australian pastor Mark Sayers urges us to consider how God may work most powerfully when His people are not in a position of cultural influence and power, but rather in a place of weakness. He writes:

What if our attempts at relevance, at mimicking and outdoing the beautiful world, actually limit our ministry potential? What if our increasing strangeness to Western culture is actually to our advantage? What if the fact that you can no longer be warmly embraced in the contemporary cultural fold if you are an orthodox Christian is actually the best thing that has happened to you?

What if? Could it be that that’s how the Lord wants to work through His people in our day?

“So don’t be ensnared by the desire for a king like all the other nations,” God is saying to His people. “You need to let Me choose who’s going to rule over you.” These verses also speak to how we view leaders in the church. Are we looking for leaders among us who have been chosen and set apart by God, whose lives are marked by Christlikeness? Do we honor and esteem men and women whose lives remind us of Jesus and who make us want to be more like Jesus? Are those the kinds of leaders we choose? Or do we use worldly values to choose our spiritual leaders? Are we looking for someone who will put our church on the map, who will compete with another church down the road, who will be impressive in the eyes of the world—unlike Jesus, Who *“didn’t have an impressive form or majesty that we should look at Him, no appearance that we should desire Him”*? Our King is a suffering servant, Who *“was despise and rejected by men”* (Isaiah 53:2-3).

The church in our nation today is littered with the wreckage of leaders who are more like the world than like Christ. These leaders didn’t emerge in a vacuum; they rose out of the

cravings of Christians who wanted a king like the nations. When we value power, popularity and what looks impressive to our neighbors more than we value humility, meekness and sacrificial servanthood, we will end up deeply regretting we got the leaders we demanded. So temper your passions for human leaders because our political passions are perilous. Make sure you're following leaders God has chosen and appointed, not putting your hope and trust in the kind of power this world values.

2. Political power can corrupt.

In Deuteronomy 17:16-17, God warns His people through His servant Moses about how power can expose a king to the corrupting influence of weapons, women and wealth. He says to His chosen king, "Beware of accumulating weapons." Verse 16 Says, *"However, he must not acquire many horses for himself."* That was a cavalry for an army storing up military might. *"[Don't] send the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the Lord has told you, 'You are never to go back that way again.'"*

The king's job was to rely on the Lord. He was to be a beacon to the people, showing them what it means to trust in the Lord and depend on Him. He was to be a man of faith. It's like what we heard this morning from Psalm 20:6-8:

Now I know that the LORD gives victory to his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories from his right hand. Some take pride in chariots, and others in horses, but we take pride in the name of the LORD our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand firm.

That's the kind of king God wants for His people, someone who says, "I'm going to trust in the Lord my God, not in chariots and not in horses."

He also tells this king, "Beware of accumulating women." Look at Deuteronomy 17:17. *"He must not acquire many wives for himself so that his heart won't go astray..."* One of the ways ancient kings would secure domination in their foreign policy was to take wives from foreign nations. Then these women became tools of diplomacy. They helped the king cement alliances and form treaties. They also, according to one commentator, became decoration for the court to impress visitors.

With these wives came their idols, the gods of the other nations and the seduction that would bring to the king. So this is an abuse of women, of which God does not approve. It is also a snare to the king's heart, of which God is warning him, "If you do this, your wives will lead you astray to forsake the true and living God."

So beware of accumulating weapons, women and wealth. Look again at the second part of verse 17: *“He must not acquire very large amounts of silver and gold for himself.”* In other words, when God puts you in a position of power, don’t use that position for selfish personal gain. I don’t think I need to do a whole lot of illustrating on this point, do I? It’s really striking how 3,000 years later human nature hasn’t changed very much. Weapons, women and wealth are the same snares that derail many leaders today.

These same warnings apply to leaders in the church. Church leaders must not rely upon worldly weapons to fight spiritual battles. We are to lead God’s people to be loyal to the Lord with an attitude of faith and trust in Him. In Acts 6, when God describes the qualifications for the first deacons, he says they are to be men full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. Faithfulness in marriage is a crucial requirement for those who hold church office. He must be the husband of one wife, or a “one-woman man.”

First Peter 5 says elders must not shepherd God’s flock out of greed for money. The character of those who lead God’s people must set an example of not succumbing to the tempting allure of money, sex and power. In our political leaders, how rare it is to find women and men who are above reproach in these arenas of character. Why is it so rare? Because there’s only one way for human beings—only one way for leaders—to resist these powerful temptations and overcome them, and it is not found in ourselves.

3. Political humility is precious.

That leads us to the last principle this morning: political humility is precious. I choose that word precious to refer to something that is highly to be treasured but rarely to be found. Like gold and diamonds, it is rare to find political leaders who are humble. Sadly, sometimes it is rare to find church leaders who are humble.

What is humility? Humility is the recognition that everything I need is found outside of me and that I must abase myself, thinking low of myself and highly of God. It means to look to Him to fill me with all He requires me to be if I’m going to be a blessing to others and give glory to Him. That’s what humility is. It’s looking outside myself for everything I need.

The way we look outside ourselves for the wisdom, power and purity God requires is through a daily devoted dedication to hearing the Word of God. Listen to Isaiah 66:2: *“This is the Lord’s declaration. I will look favorably on this kind of person...”* My ears tune up now. What kind of person will You favor, Lord? What’s the kind of person You want to bless? Here it is: *“...one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and trembles at my word.”* That’s the kind of man God says, “I will look with favor upon.”

That's what God required of the king over His people—humility, submission and trembling before His Word. That's the only way any human being can overcome the temptation of money, sex and power. When we become addicted to these idols of money, sex and power, it's because we worship and treasure those things more than we worship the true and living God. We worship our way into an addiction to money, sex and power, and the only way out is through worship of the living God and living a life of listening to His Word.

So for the king of God's choosing, God says verse 18, "The first thing you're to do when you ascend to your throne is to call for the Levitical priests. Get them all in your throne room, so they can watch this. You are to write out by hand a copy of this instruction for yourself on a scroll." They're to watch the king as he writes this instruction.

What did this instruction include? Some think it might have included the whole first five books of the Bible—the Pentateuch, the books of Moses. More likely it's talking about the book of Deuteronomy, which Moses is fond of calling "this instruction," this Torah. Writing out the whole book of Deuteronomy would take about a week. Those priests would sit there watching this king painstakingly writing out the book of Deuteronomy in Hebrew on a scroll.

Why? Because it forced him to slow down, pay attention to every word, internalize what he was reading and hearing when he wrote it out by hand. Verse 19 says this handwritten copy of the Law was to remain with him. He was to carry it with him everywhere he went and he was to read from it all the days of his life. Get to know this Book, this instruction.

We are blessed to have the Word of God with us on our phones now, on apps I'll bet most of you have. I have a number of translations that I carry around all the time. But if you're like me, when you open up one app on your phone, there are other things calling for your attention at the same time. It's easy to get distracted. So in addition to the gift of having the Bible on your phone, I'd encourage you to have some physical copies of the Scripture by your bed and in your workplace where, from time to time, you will open this Book and focus on nothing else but hearing from God and listening to His voice.

Remember, we haven't really believed the Word of God until we've obeyed the Word of God and that's what God commands the king in verse 19. This copy of the Word was to "*remain with him, and he was to read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn*" —because this doesn't come automatically— "*to fear the Lord his God, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes.*" It was to be a lifelong pursuit of discipleship for this king: to write, read, learn to fear, obey these words and put them into practice.

That's the call to this king and the effect this discipline would have on his life was that it would produce humility. Look at verse 20: "*Then...*"—only then, after he's paid careful,

assiduous attention to the Word of God in his daily life. *“Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel.”*

Listen, anyone who reads the Word of God and comes away from it thinking he’s better than his brother has not even begun to hear what God is saying. Hearing the Word humbles the heart. It makes you tender and sympathetic toward your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. That’s the kind of leadership God wanted for His people Israel. How kind God is to desire this kind of leadership for His people. He doesn’t want kings who are corrupted by money, sex and power. He wants a king who is saturated in the Word, meditating on it day and night, careful to obey, then humbly taking the role of a servant among his people—not lifted up above them, but humbly serving them.

Where can we find such a precious, humble king? King David seems like a prime candidate, being “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). When you read the books of Chronicles, all the other kings of Judah were judged in comparison to King David. But King David had more than one wife, didn’t he? There was some adultery; there was some bloodshed; there was some reliance on military power that God was not pleased with in David’s life. That means King David wasn’t the king they were looking for.

Then King David is promised by God that he would have a son who would sit on his throne and reign forever. A few chapters later, in 2 Samuel 7, Solomon is born. We’re holding our breath, thinking, “Oh, yes, maybe he’s going to be the one.” Through the first nine chapters of 1 Kings, the author leaves us in suspense. Could Solomon be the one?

Then in 1 Kings 10:21 we read, *“All of King Solomon’s drinking cups were gold, and all the utensils of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. There was no silver, since it was considered as nothing in Solomon’s time...”* Go to verse 26, *“Solomon accumulated 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen and stationed them in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem.”* Then in 1 Kings 11:3, oh boy, *“He had seven hundred wives who were princesses and three hundred who were concubines, and they turned his heart away.”*

Did you catch that? Everything Deuteronomy 17 said that kings should not do, Solomon did. He accumulated horses, wives and gold. In case anyone missed the point, the author of 1 Kings makes it loud and clear in 1 Kings 11:6, *“Solomon did what was evil in the LORD’s sight, and unlike his father David, he did not remain loyal to the LORD.”* So he’s not the one.

So we’re left longing for a son of David who will come, who will be the king His people desperately need, a King who would not acquire for Himself large amounts of gold and silver, but instead, though He was rich, He would become poor for our sake, so that we through His

poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). He would be King Who would not accumulate many horses for Himself or bear the sword in military might. Instead, He would need to borrow a donkey so He could go riding into Jerusalem. He would be a King Who would not take many wives for Himself, but would fully and utterly devote Himself to one bride, loving her at her very worst, even to the point of laying down His life for her so He might sanctify her and present her to Himself blameless forever.

He would be a King Who has the Law of God written on His heart and Who has grace flowing from His lips. Unlike every other political leader, there's nothing in Him you'll need to worry about, nothing you'll ever need to filter out, nothing you'll ever need to brace yourself for because He's perfectly trustworthy and blameless.

Church, you know this King's name, because you're married to Him. He's your Bridegroom—King Jesus. You bow down to Him, for He is your Lord. You are led with gladness and rejoicing by Him. You, dear church, will not be satisfied with any other earthly leader until you see the Son of Man, this King, coming on the clouds with power and glory. Isaiah 33:17 says your eyes shall see the King in His beauty and you will view a land that stretches far, as He returns to rule over a new creation with wisdom, might, righteousness, purity, love and compassion. We the church will say:

All hail King Jesus
All hail Emmanuel
King of Kings
Lord of Lords
Bright Morning Star
And throughout eternity
We'll sing Your praises
And we'll reign with You throughout eternity

[All Hail King Jesus by David Moody]

No other leader will satisfy us like Jesus can and like Jesus does. So yes, engage in politics. Vote. Pray for our nation this week. But know this, church. If your passion for what happens on election day exceeds or comes anywhere near close to the degree of your passion for our King Whom we worship today, and the King we will worship next week, and next year, and a thousand years from now, then you are going to be gravely disappointed and disillusioned, no matter the outcome.

What is politics? I was thinking about this as I ran the other day and I thought, "Politics is the sometimes noble, but always illusive attempt of humanity to create a world only Jesus can bring." That's what politics is. I was listening to Mark Sayers, who said, "Today, we want the

Kingdom without the King.” In our post-Christian culture, that’s the problem. That’s a description of what we see in our world. That’s what our nation is craving. We want an end to the corona virus, a thriving economy, a job for everyone, health care for all, an end to racism, law and order in the streets, fair judges, Kingdom blessings. But at the same time we want the right to choose for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. We don’t want anyone else forcing their religion or morality on us. We want to do what is right in our own eyes. We are a nation of 328 million people, each of whom wants the authority to be his or her own king and judge. We want the Kingdom without the King. That’s why every election will ultimately let us down.

We are God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule. We’re the people who pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-15). We are the only people on the earth who have the privilege of showing to the world the beauty of King Jesus. Before we can expect the world to obey the laws of the Kingdom, they’ve got to see the beauty of the King. That’s why we’re here. We’re here to show the beauty of the King and the goodness of His Kingdom to a world that is starving for the blessings of His Kingdom, but they will never be able to enjoy those blessings until they bow the knee to Christ the King.

So let’s take this time now to pray and confess our sins before our King as we prepare to take His supper together.

Lord Jesus, search our hearts now. We confess to You that sometimes our passion for the things the nation seeks after becomes greater than our passion for Your Kingdom and Your righteousness. Have mercy on us, Lord, for our idolatry. Lead us in repentance and restore our passion for You, we pray. Lord, to whatever extent the corrupting influences of power, sex and money are eroding our affection for You, have mercy on us. Lead us in repentance and forgive us. And to whatever extent we want the blessings of Your Kingdom without bowing the knee to You as our King, have mercy on us, correct us and lead us in the paths of righteousness, submission to You, humility of heart and trembling before Your Word. We pray this in Your name and for Your glory. Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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