

*The Fear of God*  
A Sermon on 2 Samuel 23:1-7 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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*The last words of David, the man chosen by God, though he was far from perfect. The Rock of Israel has spoken to me: Whoever uses their power for the sake of justice, Whoever governs in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand; to touch them one uses an iron bar.*

These are the last words of David; in the end all people will be judged as either righteous or godless. In the end we will be judged as either servants of God or servants of something that is not God. In the end there is a line that separates right from wrong.

We must make decisions about where we will step. We must know what is required for us to move onto the right side of that line, the line that divides right from wrong. David's poem gives us four clues, four indications, for understanding the line that divides right from wrong.

The first clue is not easy. It describes something you have seen in your life; meanness and self-serving intentions don't win you very many friends. In the poem, David describes the way *the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand. To touch them one uses an iron bar.*

This description reminds me of someone who was the boss of the organization where I worked. *To touch them one uses an iron bar.* No one wanted to go near the boss. None of my friends would meet with the boss alone. Most people understood this was a dangerous person.

This is not about popularity or attractiveness. I'm not talking about people who live alone because all of their family members have died. In the poem David refers to those who are like thorns. These are people who cannot be touched because they will hurt you.

I'm not talking about popularity or lack of popularity. In my example the boss was at one time extremely popular. The boss was elected to their position of authority. The person was attractive in some way. Yet one person, then another, then another realized that the boss was someone to be approached with extreme care.

In the end, the godless don't really care about how their actions affect others. They don't care if other people are getting hurt. Their ideas, their principles and their feelings come ahead of the lives of other people.

The second indication about the line between right and wrong is more difficult to see. In the version of the poem printed in your leaflet the clue is found in these words "One who rules over people justly." Another version says "One rules over people in righteousness." Another version says, *Whoever governs fairly and well.* These words point to the reality that justice requires the work of many people, not just one person.

So I would describe those who are choosing to do right with this phrase, *Whoever uses their power for the sake of justice.* This is our second indication about the line between right and wrong. It is more difficult to judge this part of the line because there are different understandings of justice and the actions that lead to justice.

For example, consider health insurance rates. Some people think everyone should be charged exactly the same rate for health insurance. Some people think that people who are older or who have more health problems should be charged more, because it is assumed that they would use more health care services.

There is a third option. You could argue that those who require lots of health care services should, at least in some cases, be charged less for health insurance or that it should be given them at no cost. Many people might say that this would not be fair. Yet if you consider that those who require lots

of health care services sometimes cannot work because of sickness or disability, this might be the only way some of these people could receive the care they need.

We also might want to consider the kind of justice God is concerned about. In Holy Scriptures we have many examples of God telling us that justice is not about each person being treated the same. God's justice seems to be about giving extra attention, extra care to those who are sick, those who have no food, those who are in trouble and those who are alone. So the second indicator of the line between right and wrong might be best described as *using our power for the sake of God's justice*.

The third indicator about the line between right and wrong is the most difficult of all to see. It is found in the next line of the poem: *ruling in the fear of God*. What could this mean? What does it look like to live in the fear of God?

I remember one of the first times I heard this passage from 2 Samuel. I was about seven years old. I puzzled over these words 'ruling in the fear of God'. I didn't understand them.

As I grew older I listened to the words of the poem over and over again. That was because of the music our choir sang a few minutes ago. I learned the music when I was young. While my friends were listening to Stevie Wonder or the Beatles or Earth, Wind and Fire I was listening to Randall Thompson's *Last Word's of David*.

By the time I was twenty I was playing the music on the piano. But I still didn't understand this phrase, *ruling in the fear of God*. By the time I was forty I was directing the church choir as the choir was singing the anthem. I was beginning to get a better idea of the meaning of the words.

By the time I was forty I understood that a person who lives in the fear of God does not usually act or feel afraid. People who live in the fear of God do not spend their lives huddled under their blankets in bed. I began to understand partly because by the time I was forty I had known a few people who had spent a significant portion of their lives huddling under their blankets in bed. I could tell that this is not what the poem is talking about.

By the time I was forty I was beginning to understand more of the meanings of the word *fear*. When I was forty years old I spent a lot of time watching the people who were in charge at work, at church, in the government. I was beginning to understand the meaning of the phrase *ruling in the fear of God*.

A few decades later I have seen many more examples of people using the power they have been given for good or for bad. *The fear of God* is about what we do, more than about what we say. *The fear of God* is about understanding God's priorities. *The fear of God* is about respecting the fact that my agenda for life withers like grass and God's agenda is eternal. *The fear of God* is not about whether or not you sometimes feel afraid, because the reality is that everyone is afraid of something. The fear of God is about finding your strength in the one who gives all strength and understanding that the strength you have is not coming from you.

Using our power in the fear of God is the third indicator of that line between right and wrong. The fourth indicator about the line comes from David himself.

David gives us the most dramatic illustration that none of us spends our entire lives on one side of the line or the other. David did some really good things and he made some terrible mistakes. David is the most visible example of the fact that no one is perfect, we all make mistakes. Many times it seems like life is a narrow path and the line between good and evil curves this way and that along the path.

None of us is perfect. We all have to pay attention to where we are stepping. The line is not straight and it is not always easy to see.

So we try to follow the example Jesus gave us. We try to care for those who need it most. We try to make sure no one is left out of the celebration. We try to not put ourselves above others. We try to love one another.