

Leadership among Men

Deuteronomy 1:9-18

One of the things I remember learning in seminary was a description of church power, or church authority. The idea was stressed and emphasized in several classes, as it was when I was examined to be licensed to preach and then ordained. It was the phrase “ministerial and declarative.” We were always taught that “all church power is only ministerial and declarative.” That’s a quote from our Book of Church Order, right at the beginning. And those words mean something.

I’ve come to understand those words more and more over the years, sadly, sometimes because I have seen church power differently. Ministerial means that if I have authority, it is only the authority to minister God’s word. I have no authority to administer my own will, or my own desires. I can’t tell you what to do. I can’t impose on you what I think is good or right. I can only minister to you what God has said! I am not a king, bearing sovereign authority. I am not a magistrate, but a minister. I am a minister of the gospel, bearing the authority to proclaim to you what God has said.

And that power is also declarative. That is to say, I don’t legislate. I don’t make my own laws. Instead, I declare the laws that God alone has established. God is the King, he is the President or Chief Executive Officer. God is the legislature, too, establishing the very laws he enforces. And God is the judge. To use illustration of our American form of government, he himself occupies all three branches of the government—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial.

Any power that I have, or any elder within the church, must be subject to that. Power as it is to be exercised among men is

ministerial and declarative. And that idea of leadership among men is what we have before us in Deuteronomy 1. Remember this is the second law, the literal translation of the name of the book. In Hebrew, the title of the book comes from verse 1, “the words.” So these are “the words.” The words of God “which Moses spoke to all Israel on this side of the Jordan in the wilderness.”

What we come to this morning is a renewal of the event that took place in Exodus 18, when Moses chose elders to assist in the leadership of the people of Israel. If you remember, that was the very wise suggestion of Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro. The reasoning was simple. There was simply too much work for Moses to do by himself. There were too many people for one man to provide leadership and counsel. Now that, of course, was a good problem to have. Like when your church building gets too small, because there are too many people. Or when you need a second pastor, because there is just too much work for one man to do. That’s what Moses experienced. It was a good problem to have.

Actually, it was a blessing.

I. GOD’S BLESSING UPON HIS PEOPLE.

Don’t skip over this as we move on to the details of the judges that would be chosen for the people. Let’s start right here, with the realization that there are a lot of people. It is nothing other than,

A. The covenant blessing of a great nation.

v.10

And Moses even adds to that amazing description with the words of,

v.11

A thousand times more numerous! That's a lot. We might say a million. Or more informally, gazillion. Whatever the largest number might be to emphasize that there really no bigger number possible. That's the means of "one thousand."

And that was God's covenant promise, wasn't it? A great nation.

Gen. 15:5 Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

Additional commentary on that promise is given to us in, Rom. 4:16 "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all 17 (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; 18 who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. 20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. 22 And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

So this is the very central reality of the promise of the gospel, and it is the very central reality of faith to believe that promise of

the gospel.

That promise is showed to us in another way also. We see here,

B. The covenant blessing of redemption.

Now, remember what I said last week, in the very first sermon on Deuteronomy. I'm going to stress this idea over and over, in one way or another another every week, every sermon. As we study the second law in Deuteronomy, you can never forget that God has provided redemption for his people. And that is a matter of grace. It's a matter of God's promise. God has redeemed his people. Now, as a people saved by grace, by the gift of God, the law gives them instructions on how to live. Most especially, how to love God, in response to his grace.

So here again we see that promise of grace. We see that promise of redemption. Just look at verse 10. Look at what God has accomplished. The very thing he promised.

v.10 "The Lord your God has multiplied you."

v.10b "...and here you are today, as the stars of heaven in multitude."

And where were they, this great multitude of God's people? They were on the banks of the Jordan, ready to enter the promised land. They were ready to take possession of the land of their inheritance. And they had already been delivered out of the bondage of the land of Egypt. That was their redemption. That was their salvation. They have already been delivered! They had already received the covenant promise of redemption. They were already God's people, God's nation, his own special treasure.

That's the starting point for the book of Deuteronomy. God has provided redemption for his people.

v.10 “The Lord your God has multiplied you, and here you are today, as the stars of heaven in multitude.”

More fully,

Deut. 10:15 “The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day...20 You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name. 21 He is your praise, and He is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen. 22 Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude.”

That’s grace. That’s the very definition of redemption.

Then, in that context, we see,

II. THE BLESSING OF WISE LEADERSHIP.

Here we will see the same principles applying to us today as well, for many of the things embodied in Moses’ selection of these judges were incorporated into the choosing and electing of elders in the New Testament church.

To begin with the obvious reality,

A. The need for leadership among men is obvious.

v.9

v.12

Go back with me, please, to,

Ex. 18:13 “And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. 14 So when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people

stand before you from morning until evening?” 15 And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

Ex. 18:17 So Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you do is not good. 18 Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. 19 Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. 20 And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. 21 Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. 22 And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace.” 24 So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.”

And so when Paul writes to his young disciple Titus, he makes this comment,

Titus 1:5 “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.”

If there are no elders, then the church is deficient. Out of order. And Titus ministry, as it is with church planters today, was to set in order that deficiency.

Notice, however, the type of men that were to be chosen by Moses and the people of Israel.

v.13-15

Wise, understanding and knowledgeable men were needed. In other words,

B. Leadership among men require godliness and wisdom.

Character matters! Godliness matters. Knowledge combined with understanding—that's godliness. A clear mind. A well-ordered life. Godliness. And with it, the ability to make judgments, with discernment. I read a description of such men just a minute ago,

Ex. 18:21 "Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness."

And again, Paul repeats that same theme with regard to the NT church, emphasizing the importance of godliness and character. Back to,

Titus 1:6 "...if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, 8 but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."

1 Tim. 3:2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with

all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil."

Leadership requires character. Not a dominating personality. Not even so much an accumulation of gifts. The ability to teach is about the only distinct spiritual gift identified. Everything else has to do with the heart. With the character of a man.

Along with the wisdom of knowledge. Specifically, knowledge of God's word. Back to,

Ex. 18:20 "And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do."

There is my reference to church power being only ministerial and declarative. There is the emphasis upon God's own law, God's own statutes. And it is God's words which minister and teachers ought to use to show God's people "the way in which they must walk and the work they must do."

And that, of course, if my responsibility as well. Not to exert my own authority over you, to demand that you obey me and my words. But rather, to minister and declare to you what God has said. To proclaim what God's word requires of you.

2 Tim. 2:14 "Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. 15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

What a blessing it is, for Moses, and for us, when there are such faithful leaders among God's people. And, I might add

quickly, what a great curse when there are not—when men are not present, and when those who do lead do so in a wicked and ungodly way.

v.13 “Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.”

And then, there will be,

III. THE BLESSING OF GOD’S JUSTICE.

Now, by the word “justice” I don’t simply mean God’s retribution. When we use that word today, it seems to most often have that connotation of retribution or punishment. Punishment, even vengeance. The cry is often heard, “I want justice.” But there is more to God’s justice. Justice is a word that means righteous. Or more simply, doing what’s right. Or judge righteously.

v.16

There is an essential element to such righteous justice, and that is impartiality.

A. Righteous judgments require impartiality.

v.17 “You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man’s presence, for the judgment is God’s.”

Partiality means that you play favorites. You are partial to one side over the other. You give one person an advantage, and deny or despise the claim of the other side. The rich and prosperous get all the advantages and the poor and downtrodden are rejected. And the determining factor is not the exercise of justice, the issue is not of which claim is right, but you are arbitrary. You assume the right to make your own judgements, the way you want to make them.

So you favor someone with more money. Or more prestige.

You favor someone who has a greater influence over you, or somehow who can you the most good. Or the least harm. It’s all politics, and the political climate of our country at the present times knows so very little about righteous judgments! Everything is political. Everything is partisan. The democrats vote democratic and the republicans vote republican. And there is little hope for the impartiality of righteous judgments in that context.

James 2:1 “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. 2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, 3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” 4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

Notice in verse 17 that “the judgment is God’s.” That’s the restraint which godly, faithful leaders must always feel. Whatever judgment they are called upon to make, whatever difficult decision they might face, the reality is always that, the judgment is God’s! And when I make a decision as a member of our session, for example, that thought must be foremost in my mind. The judgment belongs to God. I am but a minister to declare what is righteous in his sight, according to his word.

And I am not to be a men-pleaser. The judgment is God’s. I am not to exercise authority in the church such that I can gain the approval or approbation of men. I am not to make decisions and judgments such that I will be liked or honored, nor to gain the reward of men in their honor or their praise. The judgment is God’s. And, therefore, I cannot show impartiality, giving preference to someone else in order to win their favor or approval.

2 Chron. 19:5 “Then he set judges in the land throughout all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, 6 and said to the judges, “Take heed to what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. 7 Now therefore, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care and do it, for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, no partiality, nor taking of bribes.”

With one final thought. One final application then and now.

B. Righteous judgments require knowledge and application of God’s word.

Not just the smarts. Not just intellectual ability or intelligence that we might measure according to some worldly standard. The requirement is not a certain IQ, or some level of advanced education. But rather, the knowledge and application of God’s word. The ability to know, and to receive, whatever God says about a particular subject.

That certainly follows from what I have already stressed in verse 17, the judgment is God’s.” Moses continues,

v.17 “The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.’ 18 And I commanded you at that time all the things which you should do.”

A fuller explanation of that is again found in,

Ex. 18:19 “Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. 20 And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.”

In other words, leadership among men, then and now, requires that God’s word be proclaimed. That God is allowed to

speak to his people through his own word. That all judgments and duties would be measured by what God says, that his word would remain the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Moses benefitted greatly from these judges. And the church of Jesus Christ benefits when similar leadership is exercised. And the blessing of God’s justice comes when God’s word is understood correctly, when it is explained clearly, and when it is applied appropriately.

And so, in the line of these righteous judges in Deuteronomy, God continues to speak to his people through his word. And leadership among men today, especially in terms of the gospel ministry, requires that any and every faithful preacher follow Paul’s admonition to Timothy, words I have always kept at the front of my mind as I preach week after week to God’s people,

2 Tim. 4:1 “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

Preach the word, not the doctrines and commandments of men.

Oh, that the church of Jesus Christ might know the blessing of righteous judgments made by godly men, men who understand that whatever power and authority they might possess, it is only the power to minister the word of God and to declare the truth of God to God’s people.