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## **The Power of Good Thinking**

### **I Samuel 24: 1-16**

Every Sunday, without realizing it, we ask God for the virtue of prudence as we pray, after the manner of our Lord, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

We ask God for the wisdom not to put ourselves in situations where our reasoning powers our competence of analysis, our coping skills, are overwhelmed.

Yet life constantly puts before us choices that challenge and test us.

As Humphrey Bogart said in *Casablanca*,

“Of all the gin joints in all the world, she has to walk into mine.”

So, too, of all the caves in the Dead Sea area, King Saul happened to turn into the very opening where David and his soldiers were hiding. But weren't Saul and David friends? They had been.

Once they had been close colleagues, but King Saul feared that his protégé David was angling for his throne, and acting out of insecurity and paranoia had declared David *persona non grata*, chasing him around the countryside.

King Saul had caught a tip that David was holed up on the western shore of the Dead Sea, a place known as Engedi, and had personally led his military forces on a mission to capture and slay him.

Now, in search of a bathroom break, (what the Bible means by “turns aside”) Saul walks unbeknownst into David's very presence, giving David an opportunity to catch his adversary with his pants down, so to speak.

His men say to him, “Here is the perfect chance to destroy your adversary. God has given you a golden opportunity to act.” David knows that his men are at least half-right. A chance like this must be seized.

But what exactly should he do? Kill Saul? Confront him? Ignore him? Spare him?

None of these options seemed exactly right, nor none completely wrong.

David must here call upon a virtue that the ancient classical world and Christian ethicists came to recognize as the first and foremost virtue, the quality of prudence.

St. Augustine once said that, “Virtue is the art of right living.”

That's exactly what David wants to do in this moment, find the art of right living.

But how does he summon the mental discipline to discern the best of the available options?

How does he draw from the resources of right thinking?

David senses that this is the critical moment of his life, the pivotal, defining moment of his career.

Notice then, what he does not do: he does not rush to action. He does not act on impulse.

It would be easy for David to succumb to the temptation to do unto Saul what Saul is trying to do unto him.

Such an option would eliminate one problem for David swiftly and easily.

Yet David knows that that solution to one problem would create a thousand others.

David's situation is complex: the charges against him are false; he does not want to usurp Saul's throne.

However, he can envision a day when he could sit upon the throne that Saul now occupies.

Yet if Saul dies by his hand, David knows that his dream of being king would be dashed forever.

*David realizes that prudent behavior requires an interplay of deliberation and decisiveness.*

Indeed, as David ponders this situation he senses with pristine clarity that his chief objective

has never been to take Saul's life. His primary objective is to establish his innocence and clear his name.

That recognition brings about a moment of inspiration and insight: the proper course of action

is to spare Saul's life in such a way that Saul will know that he has been spared.

Acting quickly and decisively, he slips in and slices off a piece of Saul's robe as the king is preoccupied,

then slips back away to the shadows.

It is one of the masterstrokes of his career, a decision that has been characterized by an artful balance of deliberation and decisiveness. *He has thought slowly and acted quickly*, and in this pivotal moment of his life the power of right thinking has served him well.

The virtue of prudence has guided him in the art of right living.

Yet having authored this extraordinarily inventive solution to a complex problem,

David now feels a pang of guilt over how he has treated the king.

Here the Scriptures are so subtle, so complex, in their depiction of human behavior.

No matter how deft and nuanced a positive behavior, even a righteous act usually has a shadowside.

Why does David feel a sense of guilt about his treatment of the king?

The answer is, prudence is not merely a matter of acting decisively and deliberately;

*it is also a matter of exercising one's powers of memory to draw upon the guidance of the lessons of the past.*

Part of prudence is paying homage to the wisdom of one's mentors.

On this Father's Day, let us suspect that as David looked upon Saul in his vulnerability and ignorance, he thought back to the first time he saw Saul, when he, David, was nothing but an obscure shepherd boy sent by his father to check on his brothers and take presents to their captains and convey his father Jesse's respects to King Saul.

Of course, since that time, Saul has done much that was not kingly.

But David cannot help but think back to his father's high evaluation of King Saul in days past.

Through the power of memory, an aspect of prudence, he sees Saul not only as Saul is but as he was, sees him not only through his own eyes but through his father's eyes. To be true to that memory means that even his gentle indignity to the king cannot help but spark a pang of conscience.

Yet if prudence involves an interplay of deliberation and decisiveness, it also involves an interplay of looking forward, as well as looking back.

In other words, *the prudent person exercises not only memory*

*but the power of imagination to create a new and positive future.*

The Saul before David now is not the Saul upon whom he first laid eyes.

Saul has evolved, David has evolved, their relationship has evolved.

If David was to act as if their relationships had maintained its former closeness, he would be a fool.

David must not only act with an eye upon the past, he must imaginatively envision a new future.

To do this, David must prove himself to be open-minded, eminently teachable,

passionately curious, passionately interested in exposure to the new. *Prudence requires teachability.*

Some years ago, I found myself at a driving range, a rather special driving range, at a place known as Augusta National.

On the range was a single player and his swing coach. The player's name was Payne Stewart.

Stewart had sustained a wrist injury and was not competing, but he was there to practice.

At the time, he was known for his talent, his distinctive clothing – and his explosive temper.

He was known as a player of immense potential, but he had yet to harness his abilities.

In time he would turn to faith, gain control of his emotions and marshal his abilities

to carve out a career of great achievement. But all that positives lay yet unrealized in the future.

Yet, as I watched him on the range,

I was amazed by his curiosity, his openness, his humility, his attentiveness to his instructor.

He looked like a first-time student soaking up the wisdom of an older man.

Was he a better golfer than the man teaching him? Absolutely.

But he realized that he would never become the golfer he could be unless he opened himself to the wisdom of his instructor.

His rise to greatness may have begun with his willingness to tap the power of prudence.

His ascent began as he began to learn prudence.

But here's an odd thing – and what a telling commentary it is upon the values of our time – prudence is a word that is now used with disdain.

Indeed, in our modern parlance it carries a connotation that suggests prudence is no virtue at all.

When someone says, “He chose the prudent course,” the implication is that the person acted in such a way as to evade some responsibility or moral call.

When someone says, “He chose the prudent course,” the implication is not that the person did something brave, but that someone did something shrewd and cunning as a way of avoiding bravery.

When someone says, “He chose the prudent course,” the implication is not that someone opted for what is right, but rather that they chose a path that is calculating, timorous, self-serving, looking for the easy way out.

But such a description does not fit the Christian virtue of prudence.

Look at the actions of David. He comes out of hiding, reveals himself to Saul, publicly bows in obedience to the king and makes himself completely vulnerable.

Is there anything calculating, timorous, cowardly or self-serving in such an action? No.

His actions are actually daring and dangerous.

David completely risks his life to express his love and devotion to this old friend.

*Yet by such an action David is not primarily putting his trust in Saul.*

*Rather he grounds his behavior on the trustworthiness and ultimate triumph of God's values.*

Christian prudence is always informed by the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

Indeed, David bows before Saul and says an extraordinary word of humility to him, “My father.”

Then he shows him the snippet of the robe in his hand.

“How could you accuse me of angling to do you violence, when I would not harm you even when you sought my life.

Now may God judge which of us is truly a person of violence and vengeance.”

Prudence is ultimately an act of trust in the trustworthiness of God.

Saul is deeply moved, inspired to grant David the destiny that heretofore he would have denied him:

“You will surely be king, and the kingdom of Israel will be established by your hand.”

By exercising deliberation and decisiveness, by drawing from the wisdom of the past, and creatively exercising his imagination to envision the possibilities of a positive future,

by evincing an insatiable openness to learning, an insatiable curiosity and teachability,

by trusting in the values and ultimate triumph of God's Kingdom,

by allowing his reason to be informed by the power of faith, hope and love,

David tapped the power of right thinking,

and by an act of prudence discerned the art of right living,

wringing from Saul the very blessing that he has most sought,

thereby establishing a positive destiny that positioned him well for the rest of his life.

Why talk of the virtue of prudence?

Because ours is an artificial world, where intelligence is equated with SAT scores, class ranks, grade point averages and intelligence quotients.

None of those standards, however, measure wisdom.

I remember early in my ministry assisting in a funeral for a young man I did not know well,

and as we rode to the cemetery a fellow minister said of the deceased:

“He was amazingly intelligent – and utterly dysfunctional.”

He was blessed with brains but bereft of prudence.

He could find the right answer on a test – but he was incapable of negotiating right answers in life, lacking the sustenance of virtues to guide him in the way of right living.

He lacked the ability to be guided by God in the act of choosing wisely.

Every week we read of some brilliant businessman or politician or athlete committing some incredibly stupid deed or immoral act that shames their lives and often ends their public careers.

The utter stupidity and destructiveness of their behavior is instantly apparent to everyone – everyone but them. For they had become so wrapped up in the self-importance of their own values that they lost the compass of wisdom in the process.

In a world where fewer and fewer people open their being to the nourishment and instruction of God's Spirit, the ranks of the brilliant but dysfunctional fools are growing exponentially.

In truth, the power of right thinking is rarer than we might think.

God has offered us a gift.

God has promised us that in the crisis moments of our lives the power of right thinking will be ours.

Indeed, through the ministry of the Spirit, God has promised that the power of right thinking is available to us as a resource of guidance in those pivotal moments of existence and in every day living,

When tough choices confront us, and when the challenges of daily living beset us,

God promises us the power of right thinking to direct us in the art of right living.

God has promised to provide us with the virtue of prudence each day,

and that's a blessing that can make all the difference in the outcome of our lives.

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Father's Day