

Discerning Good Advice From Bad

2Samuel 16:15-23

Often times when we go through big life events people will offer us some advice.

Going off to school, starting a new job, getting married, or having children can be moments like that.

One of the most memorable pieces of advice I have received came to me shortly before Michelle and I got married.

My dad and I were chatting one day and he gave me this advice, he said, “Mike always keep a gift in the house!”

I said, “Why?” and he went on to explain, “Because someday you are going to forget an important occasion and when you do you will have a gift to save the day.”

Immediately I scoffed at the idea.

I thought to myself, “That will never happen! I’m going to be the most thoughtful and loving husband possible, there is no way I could forget an occasion that should have a gift.”

Fast forward a year later.

I came home from work, we had supper, did the dishes and were settling in for the evening and the phone rang.

It was for Michelle. She chatted with the caller for a few minutes and then hung up.

Curiously I asked, “Who was on the phone?”

Michelle said, “It was your mom.”

“That is weird.” I thought and so I asked, “Why was my mom calling you?”

“To wish me happy birthday!” Was the reply.

You know that sinking feeling you get when you realize you have made a significant error in judgement? I had that feeling at that moment.

Guess what I thought of almost immediately.

I thought of my dad’s advice and I thought how awful it was to have my lofty thoughts of myself shot down in the very first year.

In case you are wondering I still don’t keep a gift in the house but that event has helped me to be a bit more humble in my estimation of myself as a husband and more diligent at remembering special occasions.

I am grateful for how gracious Michelle was about that and I am also happy to say that is the only time I have remembered her birthday every year since.

[Has something like that ever happened to you? Someone gives you a piece of advice and what you decide to do with that advice turns into a memorable occasion? You know the bible has a fair bit to say about giving and getting counsel from people and one of the most important things we should consider is how we discern good advice from bad? In our text this morning **2Samuel 16:15-23** we find two counselors of King David with the king's son Absalom and what happens in these verses shows us some important things that we should keep in mind about evaluating the counsel of others. There are four warnings for us in these verses, the first of which is that...]

Point #1 – Bad advisors can agree with the majority of people. (Verse 15)

The number of people who support an idea or behaviour has no bearing on the moral value of the idea or behaviour.

As we come to this portion of scripture this morning it is helpful to remember that we find ourselves in the middle of crisis in the life of King David.

His son Absalom had launched a conspiracy against his father with the goal of replacing him as king.

When news comes to David that his son has declared himself king in a city named Hebron, David decides to flee the city along with his family, his mighty men, and some servants as well.

Now in chapter 16 verse 15 the writer tells us about what is going on with Absalom.

Let's listen together. **Verse 15.**

While the exact number of people with Absalom is left unsaid, it is certainly safe to say that the crowd was big.

Absalom, according to chapter fifteen verse seven, had spent four years talking with people throughout the land of Israel convincing them that he would be a better king than his father.

David's reaction of retreat tells us that Absalom's recruitment efforts had been very successful.

For a seasoned warrior to retreat with his best and most valiant soldiers at his side tells us that he is likely severely outnumbered.

Among all those people on the side of Absalom is a man named Ahithophel.

The fact that he is specifically mentioned among the conspirators is, I believe, significant.

He was a counselor to David and his advice was held in the highest regard during his time.

The fact that he is described as being 'with' Absalom here means that he is in agreement with the crowd and that his advice will fall in line with what all these people are asking for.

The problem is he is on the wrong side of things.

Because he has chosen the wrong side the advice he gives will be trying to achieve the wrong thing which makes him a ‘miserable counselor’ as Matthew Henry puts it.

Advice in line with the majority can be wrong.

[One of the most famous stories in the bible reminds us of that. Remember Elijah’s standoff with the prophets of Baal? It was four hundred and fifty against one. Anybody playing the numbers game would go with the false prophets, but who prevailed? Elijah prevailed because he served the One true and living God.]

Truth and justice are not determined by democracy brothers and sisters.

Many times I have heard church people say things like, “We have to change with the times if we are going to survive.”

That is terrible advice and leads to destruction.

What we believe and what we stand for should never be determined by what the majority of people in society think.

The majority of our society will tell you there is no such thing as truth and if heaven exists there are lots of ways to get there.

The truth is God is perfect and His standard is perfection and we all have fallen way short of it.

Only One Person has measured up to that standard and that Person is Jesus Christ.

He willingly died in our place to suffer our penalty for breaking God’s law and He conquered the grave to prove that He is the way the truth and the life, the bible says, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.

When we trust Him by faith He takes our sins and makes us right with God.

Only Jesus can do that.

When we consider other issues like abortion, euthanasia, marriage, family, gender, justice, equality, and alike the Christian worldview is at odds with the majority of Canadians.

Many people outside the church and sadly a good number in the church would tell us to go along to get along.

That is bad advice.

[Everyone coming into Jerusalem with Absalom is in favor of him taking the throne from his father. As we will see Ahithophel is ready and willing to give advice to ensure that Absalom is successful. That is bad advice because it runs contrary to God’s choice of David and no matter how many people may agree it is still bad advice. We’ll see more from Ahithophel, but first the writer tells us of another counselor who comes to Absalom. What is said between the two shows us another important lesson about discerning advice. It shows us that...]

Point #2 – Pride can deafen our ears to good counsel. (Verses 16-19)

When people delight in themselves they have a tendency to hear what they want to hear and in so doing miss what they need to hear.

Verse 16 reintroduces us to a man named Hushai.

The writer here reminds us that Hushai is ‘David’s friend’.

Back in chapter fifteen Hushai had come out of Jerusalem and had met David at the top of the Mount of Olives wanting to go with the king and his servants.

David stopped him saying, “You will be a burden to me” probably on account of limited mobility.

But David said, “If you return...and say to Absalom, ‘I will be your servant, O king’...then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel.”

Despite the risk that is what Hushai does and because he is acting as a spy we need to hear what he says in light of that.

He says, “Long live the king! Long live the king!”

Absalom just assumes Hushai is talking about him, but could have easily said that with David on his heart. **Verse 17.**

Absalom is right to be suspicious.

The word translated ‘loyalty’ here is the Hebrew word ‘hesed’ which means covenant faithfulness or devotion.

His question is basically, “How can you abandon that kind of devotion so easily?”

What Absalom doesn’t see here is that Hushai hasn’t abandoned his loyalty to David at all, it is precisely his faithfulness that is motivating him.

In response to the question Hushai says this in **verses 18-19.**

How he says this strikes me as amazing. If seen in the proper light everything he says here, he can say with complete honesty.

Absalom is trying to assess this man’s loyalty.

To whom will Hushai give his covenant faithfulness? Who will he stick with?

Look at the foundation he establishes for his loyalty. He says his faithfulness belongs to the one “The LORD, this people, and all the men of Israel have chosen.”

When was Absalom ever chosen by the LORD to be king? He never has.

It is true many people and men in Israel right at this moment have drifted from David but is Hushai talking about the present day or is he talking about the clear work of God in the history of the nation?

Who is he talking about in terms of his loyalty? He could very well be talking about David.

You might say, “Ok but what about verse 19? He says there specifically that he will serve the king’s son.

That is true, but look again at the end of the verse. He says, he will serve Absalom as he has served David.

If he is truly a good friend and counselor he would not serve David for David’s sake but for the LORD’s sake.

Therefore, by continuing to serve David, who is the king of God’s choosing, his will be serving Absalom in the same way.

What Hushai says here should convict the conscience of David’s son, but he doesn’t hear it that way because in his pride he believes himself to be the rightful king.

[I have discovered an interesting change in my hearing over the last few years. I have noticed that when there is ambient noise like music in the background or a bunch of people talking in a room that I have a much harder time hearing these days. I find myself saying, “What was that?” or “Say that again!” But if there is no ambient noise than I can hear much better sometimes even down to a whisper at a fair distance. Without the noise I can focus in and hear.]

Pride is a lot like that ambient noise when it comes to hearing good counsel.

Pride makes it harder to hear.

It is like putting cotton balls in our ears.

How many times do people confronted with the truth of God’s word say something like, “Who are you to tell me how to live?”

Worse yet, how many people when confronted with what the LORD wants don’t hear anything at all because they are so focused on themselves?

Let’s ask ourselves this morning, do we give our attention to God’s word as matter of life and death or do we tune out so that we hear little to nothing from week to week.

[That is a terrible condition to be in and we would be wise to examine our lives and ask ourselves if pride is deafening our ears to good and godly counsel. That is where Absalom is at in his life, he has here the opportunity to turn from his evil but he can’t hear the truth of what is being said to him. Worse than that, he shows himself ready to listen to bad advice. After his conversation with Hushai he turns to Ahithophel asking what to do next. Ahithophel has an answer. It is an answer driven by worldly wisdom, which is often very tempting to follow. Because it is such a temptation we need to keep at the forefront of our minds this very important lesson, that...]

Point #3 – Advice that breaks God’s law is bad advice. (Verses 20-22)

No matter how rational and convincing someone may sound it is never helpful to listen to those who suggest defying the LORD.

Now that David is out of the city and Absalom’s seems firmly in control he asks some advice on what to do next. (Verses 20-22)

There are some layers to this that we have to try and appreciate.

The surface layer here is worldly wisdom and strategy.

Commentator Ronald Youngblood points out that in the ancient world the successor to a king automatically inherited the wives of the conquered king.

This is a very public statement that Absalom is now king.

Another layer to this is that it would be considered a point of no return.

According to biblical law Absalom’s punishment for what he does here should be the death penalty (Leviticus 20:11).

Ahithophel’s advice is intended to drive an irremovable wedge between David and Absalom.

When he says that “the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened” by this he means that when your men see that you are all in and there is no going back for you they will also be all in with you.

Absalom clearly sees it as good advice and gives no regard to God’s laws in regards to his father, marriage, family, or justice for the weak.

It is lamentable the way these women are treated both by David in leaving them and by Absalom in this tent on the roof of the palace.

Sadly, it is women and children who most often bear the consequences when people follow godless advice.

That is what David’s son does here, he sees worldly advantage and presses forward.

Not only is this bad for other people this is bad for Absalom. He is on the road to destruction and he is there because he is following counsel that breaks God’s laws.

Matthew Henry rightly comments on these verses saying, “*Those that advise men to sin certainly advise them to their hurt; and that government which is founded in sin is founded in the sand.*”

Another layer here may be a family connection.

Some commentators think there is a good chance based on 2Samuel 23:34 that Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather and that he is at least impart being motivated by revenge.

Whatever his reason, the evil he counsels is encouraging Absalom's rebellion and sin is helping him down a road that leads to destruction which is obviously bad.

[Every now and again I will see a picture with the caption above it that says, "Why women live longer than men!" Have you seen one of those? It usually a picture of a man standing on top of a ladder or working underneath a car that is ridiculously unsafe and there is often a chainsaw involved as well. In those situations there is probably a friend somewhere saying, "Looks good to me!" Meanwhile it is a deathtrap.]

That is the type of situation we are put in by advice that encourages us to break God's law.

There is now shortage of that in the world especially in the age of the internet.

You can go online and find lots of people who will tell you what you want to hear.

There are groups of people who like nothing better than to sink the hooks of godless philosophy into the hearts and minds of people especially young people.

They will make fine sounding arguments and are ready to help us cover our ears to anything that might get us to move toward repentance.

It can get to be a very bad situation.

[That raises an important question. Why do people listen to such advice? While there are likely multiple factors in answering that question, I believe that whatever surface reason we have for following bad counsel it can be traced back to what we see here in verse 23. Verse 23 brings our attention back to Ahithophel and what is said of him here gives us an important warning for our own lives. Here is the warning...]

Point #4 – It is easy to give too much authority to people. (Verse 23)

When the counsel of a human being becomes as weighty in our eyes as the Word of the LORD we are in a very dangerous position.

The first time Ahithophel is mentioned is back in chapter fifteen where it says that Absalom summoned him from his home town of Giloh.

The next time he is talked about is when David is told that he has joined the conspiracy against him.

When David gets that news he immediately turns to the LORD in prayer asking God to *turn this man's counsel into foolishness.*

Right after that is when David asks Hushai to become a spy on his behalf to 'defeat the counsel of Ahithophel'.

Why is he sought after? Why is David so concerned about him?

The only answer that makes sense is that this man is a brilliant tactician.

His name means, "My brother is foolish" which implies that the quality of his intellect is so substantial that he makes everyone else look as though they are of low IQ.

Verse 23 tells us just how much his counsel was valued.

The word of God is both infallible and authoritative.

It is always true and it should always be followed.

The same is not true of the words of human beings, but as we see here people can make the mistake of treating the counsel of people like God's Word.

For a man blinded by pride and ambition to fall into this trap is understandable, but for David to think along these lines surprising.

How could someone who knows and loves the Scriptures like David give that same kind of authority to a mere man?

If David can make that mistake, should we think we are immune to that kind of error?

I suspect what happened in this case is that over the course of several years the advice that Ahithophel gave proved to work out as he predicted time and time again.

Every time that happened people got more and more used to him being the smartest guy in the room and listening to what he said.

When that happens enough times over a long enough period people begin to assume that what he says should be done.

Here is the problem, when people start to equate the word of a man with the word of God they tend to leave behind the word of God.

That clearly happens here. Absalom has no problem breaking God's law at Ahithophel's suggestion.

That is the inevitable outcome of elevating the authority and wisdom of a human being to the same degree as the LORD.

It happened for more than a thousand years in the history of the church.

People were told listen to the priest, bishop, and pope instead of the Bible.

It is the means by which cults are established.

Listen to the leader above all.

Whether it is a friend, family member, pastor, or politician it is an easy thing to put mere men on par with the LORD.

That is idolatry and we should be careful to guard against it.

How do we do that?

I would suggest a few things. The most basic thing we need to do is be committed to knowing and understanding God's word for ourselves.

By far and away the best way to discern good counsel from bad is to be grounded in the truth of the Bible for yourself.

Something else we should consider when evaluating how much influence someone has over our thoughts and actions is how well do they know the Bible.

If people who know little of the scriptures hold sway over how we think and act we would be wise to take a big step back and re-evaluate how much influence they have on us.

We should also evaluate how easily we change our convictions or opinions because someone tells us to.

If we believe one thing on Tuesday and the opposite on Wednesday based on what a mere human being says we are likely esteeming that person far too much.

Oh how we need to guard against elevating people too much in our minds.

Someone will say, "Isn't it good to seek advice from others?"

Yes it is. The bible says, "...in an abundance of counselors there is safety." (Prov. 11:14 ESV)

That is one of the tremendous blessings of belonging to a local church, that we walk alongside one another and encourage one another towards what is right.

In order to do that well we need to keep in mind that good counsel is about more than simply the number of people who agree with it.

In order to do that we need to guard against pride which can deafen our hearing to good advice.

In order to do that we need to keep in mind that good advice is always in keeping with God's laws and we need to see one another as being under the authority of God's word, never seeing people as replacing God's word.

May God graciously guard our hearts and minds in these things for our good and His glory.