

# Good Kings and a Bad King

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

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“Bad Kings and a Good King” | Matthew 25:35; 2 Samuel 12:1-10 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Today is Christ the King Sunday, and that makes it a good day for a Bible quiz!

In the Old Testament, there were 41 kings and one queen who ruled over the people of Israel and Judah. Three kings ruled in the unified kingdom (Saul, David, Solomon), and then there were 19 in the northern kingdom of Israel and 19 kings and one queen in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Here is your quiz question: of those 42, how many are considered to have been good?

- a. All 42
- b. Only the queen
- c. Between 5 and 8
- d. None

“Good” is obviously a subjective term, but from what my commentaries and the interwebs tell me, most scholars agree that about 5 to 8 kings were considered to be good.

The names I saw most frequently as good kings are David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. Those of you who’ve done some serious Bible study will recognize those names.

But if only 5 to 8 are good, that means the majority are not. One listing of the 42 rulers had the about six listed as good, and the rest were varying degrees of bad. Most were just listed as BAD. Jehu was listed as “not good, but better than the rest.” A few others stand out:

Jehoiakim and Ahaz:                      wicked  
Omri:                                        extra bad  
Amon, Ahab, Manasseh:    the worst

<https://hisstillsmallvoice.wordpress.com/category/1-kings/>

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell the history of these kings, with many just getting a sentence or two. As we see in the quiz, most of the kings (and the queen) were bad—in that they did not do what God wanted.

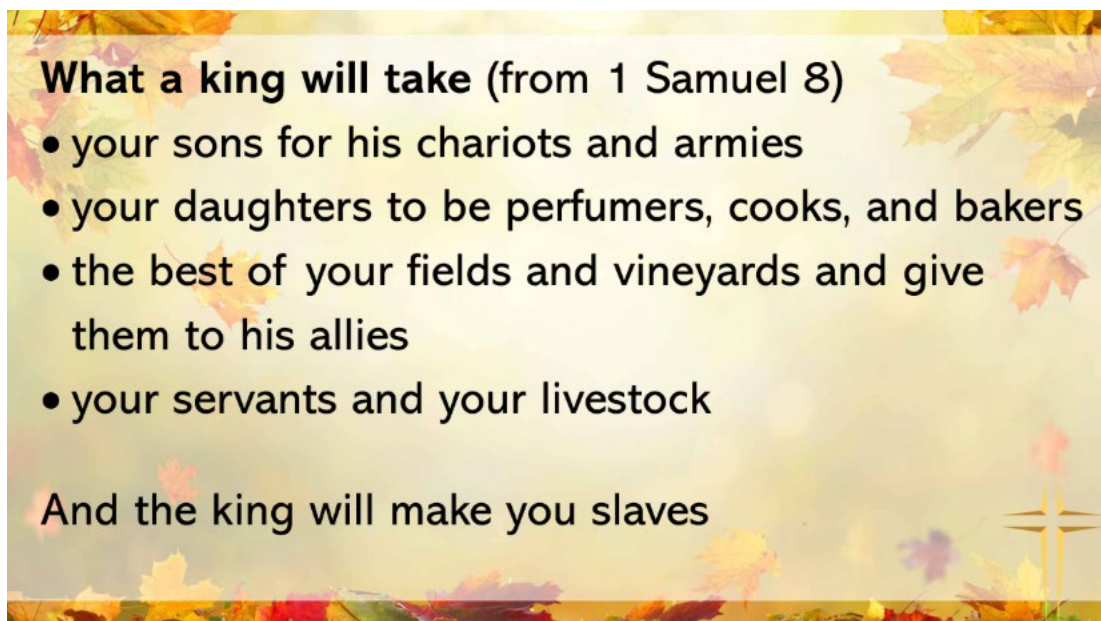
And given what the Bible tells us about the origin of Israel's kings, it's no surprise that so many were bad.

After the people of Israel settled in the Promised Land, they were ruled by judges. Other nations had kings, but Israel was different.... until they weren't. In the early chapters of 1 Samuel we read about how the people being increasingly unhappy with the judges and they wanted a king, because they wanted to be like other nations.

God tried to tell them that they were meant to be different and that God would be their king, but the people grew increasingly insistent. Finally God seems exasperated with the stubbornness of the people and says to Samuel:

Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 1 Samuel 8:7

Through the voice of Samuel, God warned the people about what a king would do. It's a long paragraph, which I've summarize here. The king will take.... your sons for his chariots and armies, your daughters to be perfumers cooks and bakers, the best of your fields and vineyards and give them to allies, your servants and your livestock. And the long warning concludes with God saying through Samuel: you shall be slaves of the king.



Then God says, “And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves....”

So begins the history of monarchy in biblical Israel.

While most of the kings can be classified as bad, some of them were not entirely bad. The best known of the kings is David, who interestingly had some of the worst behavior but is also known as a good king. We know more about David than any other king—the good and the bad.

Our reading for today is about David, and it comes from 2 Samuel 12. But we need the context. In 2 Samuel 11, we read about David and Bathsheba, one of the most vivid and tragic narratives in the Bible.

From his roof top, David spies a woman bathing. He sends for her and the text says “he lay with her.” She became pregnant. Her husband was a soldier, a man of courage and integrity. David ends up having him killed, and he takes Bathsheba as his wife.

It’s a very matter of fact description. David is in control: he sends and he takes, just as God had said the kings would do. In the text Bathsheba has no agency. She is wife of Uriah and object of David. In the effort to make David look better, some commentators have suggested that Bathsheba seduced David, but there’s no evidence in the text of that.

So in this account David is guilty of adultery, coveting, and murder—blatantly violating three of the ten commandments.

In this context, God sends Nathan, a little-known advisor the King David. Nathan shares a story—a story with a purpose. Interestingly, in today’s vernacular the phrase “you are the man” or “you da man” is popular as an affirmation. It’s used here in a very different way.

Listen for God’s word:

<sup>1</sup>and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. <sup>2</sup>The rich man had very many flocks and herds, <sup>3</sup>but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. <sup>4</sup>Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” <sup>5</sup>Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; <sup>6</sup>he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing and because he had no pity.” <sup>7</sup>Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; <sup>8</sup>I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your bosom and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah, and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. <sup>9</sup>Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. <sup>10</sup>Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

I think Nathan is one of the most underrated people in the Bible. He appears here and in just a few other places. In today’s reading he speaks truth to power, showing both courage and wisdom. The king has all the power.

If Nathan had walked in and said “Hey King David, you sinned big time! Lust, adultery, lying, murder.... What were you thinking?” we would have heard no more from Nathan.

Minds aren’t changed by pointing fingers and telling people how bad they are.

But by sharing this story and making David see the injustice, he helps David see himself in a new way. And as we see from the rest of the biblical narrative, David went on to be (for the most part) a good king.

So thanks to Nathan, with his courage in speaking truth to power and his wisdom in using a story like this, David repents.

We see that repentance in the Bible. Psalm 51 is a classic prayer of repentance that we use during Lent. The superscription for it, sort of a preface, is very particular, saying this is the prayer of David after his interactions with Bathsheba.

So David ended up being one of the good kings, and this moment of clarity and repentance is pivotal in the story of his life.

In a sense this is the good news of the gospel, that people can change, leaving selfish and foolish behavior behind.

Unfortunately, we don’t have enough Nathans in our world who speak truth to power in wise and productive ways.

We’re really good at pointing out the flaws of other people, but that doesn’t lead to change. We’re also really good at not seeing the flaws in ourselves.

Hundreds of years after David, after many more failed kings, God sent Jesus, to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Jesus began his ministry, “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17).

He called people to follow him and to live in a new way, as citizens of this kingdom, as opposed to the kingdom of Herod or any other earthly king or queen.

Every year, on the Sunday before Advent begins, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, also known as Reign of Christ Sunday. It’s a day for us to remember that we owe our ultimate allegiance not to any earthly king, but instead to God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Artists over the years have portrayed Jesus as king in a variety of ways.

There are limitations of the term kingdom, so we sometimes use reign, commonwealth, or kin-dom.

Since we're thinking about kings, I'm using the term kingdom today.

God's kingdom is unlike any kingdom of this world. In our world, might makes right and the powerful trample on the meek.



In Israel and Judah, most of the kings were corrupt, greedy, and selfish. There were some good ones. The same can be said for rulers today. Yes some are good, but too many are corrupt, greedy, and selfish.

God's kingdom stands as an alternative, and it's where our ultimate loyalties belong.

Jesus taught about the kingdom repeatedly, especially in Matthew's gospel. Jesus urged his followers to pray: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

God's kingdom is about forgiveness, not revenge. It's about love of enemies, not conquest of foes.

In God's kingdom, the focus is on the lost, the least, and the last.

We see that most clearly in Matthew 25, a chapter of parables about the kingdom, where we are told what Jesus the King will do.

The chapter opens with "the kingdom of heaven will be like this."

After a couple other parables, Jesus shares the parable of the sheep and the goats.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

The simple and profound message of this kingdom is that everyone matters. Everyone. Every single person is a beloved child of God, a part of God's kingdom.



- **dismantling structural racism**
- **building congregational vitality**
- **eradicating systemic poverty**

*Matthew 25 is about the healing and restoration of relationships, systems, and societies that reflect God's justice and love.*

But we know that the good news of the gospel isn't just about individuals. It's about all of us, and that's why the Presbyterian Church developed the Matthew 25 initiative, which calls us to work for congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, eradicating systemic poverty.

We need to engage with systems and structures, especially with the recognition that no earthly king or leader is perfect.

And at the same time that we engage with the systems and structures, we need to remember to treat each person with respect as a child of God, just as Jesus teaches in Matthew 25, where his disciples learn that when they are kind to someone, they are being kind to Jesus himself.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the systems and structures, we forget about the people, or even the one person right in front of us.

So, it's Thanksgiving week. Many of us are connecting with family the next few days. And "some" of us don't have perfect relationships with all of our family members. For most of us there are long simmering resentments, political differences, annoying habits (which include our habits...)

Just in case you have a tense or stressful or awkward moment with a family member, or a co-worker, or a neighbor, please remember the good news of God's kingdom, that everyone matters. Everyone no matter how bitter, delusional, or annoying they may be is a beloved child of God.

Most people in your family probably know that you go to church. So with your words and your deeds let's show them that we know what the kingdom of God is all about.

Let us pray....