

Godly Kings  
Deuteronomy 17:14-20

What does any of this have to do with us modern Americans? For however entertaining we might find the antics of Harry and Meghan, and however charming we might find Kate and William and their children to be, we haven't had a king since we declared our independence from George III, way back in 1776. And come to think of it, he was the last king of the United Kingdom that really had any significant power to appoint ministers or form governments. More recent monarchs, including the current King Charles III, serve in a primarily ceremonial role, although they have the right to advise the Prime Minister, the person truly responsible for running the country.

But although modern hereditary monarchs don't have the kind of absolute authority that the Pharaohs had back in Moses' time, there are still plenty of individual people whose personal decisions control the fate of millions. Vladimir Putin, for example, singlehandedly started a war between Russia and Ukraine, killing hundreds of thousands of people on both sides, costing hundreds of billions of dollars, and increasing the price of food all around the globe. Closer to home, our Federal Congress continues to delegate more and more regulative power to the President, to the point where he can effectively make or reverse laws. And didn't our experience with COVID highlight the great authority each state's governor has to manage even our most personal decisions, those concerning our health?

No, we may not have kings anymore. But as more and more aspects of all of our lives fall under the control of one level of government or another, the character of our leaders has never been more important. So, let's take a look at how Moses said ancient Israelite kings should behave. Maybe we can find some principles that will help us decide who our modern leaders should be.

And that's probably where we need to start: with how such leaders should be chosen. After all, we Americans pride ourselves on our free and fair elections, and we insist on being able to decide who gets to take public office. In Mississippi, we elect not only executives such as governors and sheriffs, and legislators such as aldermen, supervisors, representatives and senators. We also elect our district attorneys and judges. We therefore claim the right to decide who operates every branch of our government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

And of course, that's why so many candidates are putting up signs, posting notices in the newspapers, and knocking on our doors these days. They need our votes if they want the power their offices convey. But what sorts of promises are they making in order to gain those votes? To which of our desires do they appeal?

On the Federal level, many promise lavish spending programs. They insist that they will employ more government workers and keep Social Security and Medicare benefits at current levels, all the while neglecting to tell us exactly who will pay for all of this largess. Unable to print money at will, candidates at the state and local levels often promise to shift tax dollars around to support our favorite programs, or perhaps to offer tax cuts to business that will in turn provide good-paying jobs for us. In short, politicians of all sorts often promise us different kinds of economic benefits: "Vote for me and there'll be a chicken in every pot."

Of course, candidates also appeal to our desire for safety. Some voters are attracted by promises of secure borders or better-funded police departments, strong militaries and stronger foreign alliances. Other voters want funds diverted from policing to provide more community services, but

everyone shares a common desire, don't we? Even though we may differ about the best way to accomplish it, we all want to feel secure in our homes.

In sum, we often cast our votes for particular candidates because we crave the safety and prosperity they promise us. But in verse 15, Moses points us toward different priorities. For he told the ancient Israelites to set over themselves not the king they wanted but one that the Lord had chosen. In other words, they were to put their self-interest aside and seek instead to determine God's will.

And can we doubt that we modern American Christians need to do the same thing? For if we would truly follow Christ, if we would completely devote ourselves to do His service in every aspect of our lives, does it make sense for us to leave Him outside when we go into the voting booth? If we really want Jesus to be the Lord of our lives, shouldn't we seek to make Him the Lord of our ballots as well?

But that prompts the next question: what kinds of leaders does Jesus want us to choose? Since the Bible doesn't mention different candidates by name, how can we know for whom we should vote? Well, today's passage gives us some powerful, if perhaps confusing, negative examples. For Moses tells us that we should not choose kings who multiply horses or wives or money for themselves.

Now, we understand the problem many politicians have with money, don't we? After all, how is it that so many people who come from very modest means nevertheless end up being tremendously wealthy after only a few years in public office? I mean, their salaries aren't that big: the President himself only makes \$400,000 per year, while the Governor of Mississippi makes a little over \$122,000. No, isn't it more than a little likely that at least some of our public officials are taking bribes or kickbacks or making investment decisions based on inside information?

And why is corruption such a big problem? Well, let's face it: every kickback a politician gets for awarding a contract to his cronies is money that's not being spent on roads or bridges or schools or other things that will benefit the entire community. Simply put, Moses was right: if a leader is only concerned with multiplying silver and gold for himself, he's much less likely to care how well the public's business is done.

That's easy enough to understand, but what about multiplying wives? For however common polygamy may have been in Moses' time, it's hard to imagine anyone with more than one wife winning an election in modern America. But Moses wasn't just warning the ancient Israelites to avoid rulers who were given to the lusts of the flesh. For in those days, one of the principal ways that countries conducted foreign policy was for their kings to marry princesses from other kingdoms. Marriages between kingdoms thus cemented alliances between them.

So much is clear, but how could Moses' warning possibly apply to modern officeholders? Well, just as many rulers continue to focus on the money they can gain from their position, they continue to put too much trust in their alliances. For example, some presidents have looked to international institutions such as the United Nations to maintain world peace, while others have trusted in military alliances such as NATO. But the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century alone should prove that such trust is often misplaced: after all, it was precisely such a system of alliances that dragged all of the European powers into World War I, and the League of Nations was helpless to stop World War II from happening.

Closer to home, candidates often place their trust in their political allies. For example, many congressmen expect a popular president's coattails to sweep them into office. And once they have been elected, they often make deals with their fellow partisans to divide up the spoils of victory, promising to support other representatives' pet projects in return for similar spending in their own districts. But just

as is the case with corruption, such partisanship makes it too easy to compromise what is good for one's own constituents in order to preserve one's alliances, either foreign or domestic.

It is also still too easy for leaders to put too much trust in the brute force that governments allow them to wield. For that is what really lies behind Moses' warning about a king having too many horses. You see, in those days, horses and chariots were the most powerful weapons any army could have, for they combined the speed of the horse with the fighting power of a man. An ancient king with lots of chariots would therefore be like a modern general with lots of tanks: he could impose his will on the kingdoms around him – as well as on even large numbers of his own people who might be tempted to rebel against him. And it doesn't take too much imagination to see how that could be a problem, does it?

So, when you put it all together, Moses' warnings still apply to those who choose public officials today. If we would elect those whom God chooses, we must avoid leaders who are only interested in feathering their own nests, those who prefer the interests of their own friends and partisans over the public good, and those who misuse their power to force others to bend to their will. For if we follow those kinds of leaders, they will pull us further and further away from Christ.

For King Jesus didn't do any of those things, did He? Far from pursuing His personal material interests, He gave up all the comforts and glories of Heaven to come into our sin-sick world. And instead of trading favors with the well-connected, He wasn't afraid to make enemies in high places, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple and calling the scribes and Pharisees a bunch of hypocrites. And instead of pushing people around, lording His obviously miraculous, divine power over everyone, He humbled Himself before all the religious, political and military powers of this world, allowing them to arrest Him and judge Him and condemn Him. Far from being the sort of selfish, proud king Moses warned us about, Jesus chose to lay down His life on the cross so that all His people could be saved.

So, what kinds of leaders should we seek? Obviously, those who are like Christ, those who seek to live as He lives. And that's really the same thing that Moses told the people of his day, isn't it? For he said that their king must be very careful not just to read the Law of God every day, but to make his own copy of it, writing it out by hand. And just to make sure the king didn't forget anything or leave anything out, he was to conduct this exercise under the careful supervision of the Levitical priests, those who knew the Law better than anyone else.

But it wasn't enough for the king to know the Law. No, Moses made it clear that the king had to obey the Law, carefully observing all of its words and all of its statutes. And that's exactly what Jesus did, loving the Lord with all His mind, soul, and strength, and loving everyone enough to die for us, even for His enemies, even for those who rebelled against His righteous rule.

Yes, Jesus is the only King Who has ever fully fit the description Moses gave us. And to the extent that we can identify leaders in both church and state who demonstrate the same sort of self-sacrificial, unconditional, faithful love for God and men, well, we'd be foolish not to elect them, wouldn't we?

But there's one more step that we American Christians need to take if we would apply all the principles of Moses' teaching to our lives today. For remember – we have no human king. We don't even have an all-powerful dictator like the people in Russia and China have to endure. In fact, the only reason all our politicians spend so much time and money asking for our votes on such a regular basis is

because we the voters hold the sovereignty. As the American electorate, we are in charge. Collectively, we are the king, so all of Moses' warnings apply not just to our leaders but to ourselves.

But the good news is that, as Christians, we have the Spirit of the only perfect King living within us, empowering us to live as He lives and to love as He loves, to turn away from the idols of money and friendship and power, to devote ourselves completely to the service of God and of one another.

So, to the extent that we draw ever closer to Christ our King, to the extent that each of us more closely fit Moses' description of godly human kings, we will become better voters, seeking to elect only those who share the same spirit of Christ-centered, selfless service. And we might even become fit for public service ourselves. But if we or our leaders turn away from Christ, if we neglect His perfect law of love, we will inevitably fall prey to the kinds of temptations Moses warned us about. And since we have no human king, we American Christians won't have anyone else to blame.