

Leaders Under Authority

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to turn in the Bibles to page 152, and we're continuing our sermon series on Deuteronomy.

And in fact, today's passage begins at the end of chapter 16 and is two chapters in effect. So we didn't read it all, but we begin at chapter 16, verse 18.

So let's pray now as we come to God's Word. Lord Jesus, we do long to meet you in your Word, and we pray that you'll open our hearts and minds, our spiritual eyes to see, to understand, to receive, to believe and obey your Word.

For the sake of Jesus, our Saviour. Amen. Power corrupts. And absolute power corrupts.

Absolutely. It's a wise saying. It's a wise saying because our human nature is corrupt. We're fallen human beings.

[1 : 06] We're not perfect. We fail God. We fail our own standards. We're vulnerable to all sorts of temptations and desires that are wrong. Power does corrupt.

And absolute power, where there's absolute freedom to channel whatever power you've got in whatever way you want, is more vulnerable to corruption.

And within most of us, there is some desire, whether latent or expressed, for power or wealth or influence or significance or fame.

Unlimited power is a dangerous thing. We think of those who've exercised unlimited power at the evil extreme. Hitler and Mugabe, the generals of Burma and so on.

But they're the tip of the iceberg. Not necessarily is unlimited power absolutely evil, but absolute power is often corrupt and very dangerous.

[2 : 06] It's an issue that confronts us in our own society quite often. I didn't count, but, for example, in yesterday's age, there were numerous instances of articles or comments on the nature of power in our own society.

And that's been a common thread probably for a long time. There have been more than one recent article, especially since the last federal election, of the great power that the Prime Minister personally wields within the Liberal Party but within Australian society.

I'm not meaning to imply that it's all for evil, but the great power, especially with a friendly Senate after the last election, not a hostile Senate, with the number of friends that he has in high and influential places, something that over 10 years as a Prime Minister inevitably begins to accumulate.

You think of the influential people in Australia who do yield great power, but not in elected office.

The Packers and Rupert Murdoch. Alan Jones, for example, on radio in Sydney.

People like Ron Walker. And then in Yesterday's Age, an article about the great power that David White exercises, the former state Labor minister, now a lobbyist. And remember the controversy over Brian Burke earlier this year and the power that he exercises, not in elected office, but some power that comes through the connections that he had when he was in former times the Premier of Western Australia.

[3 : 34] I read in a news article the other day about the power that is yielded by the company called GUNS that runs wood chipping and logging and so on in Tasmania.

A vast power that actually is intimidatory of elected government in Tasmania and is running towards monopolies in all sorts of areas and controlling life in Tasmania and beginning to sort of spread across Bass Strait.

Because it's not just in national or state politics that you see such power either. It happens in all sorts of companies, in societies, in groups, as well as in churches.

And there are many churches, individual churches and wider conglomerations of churches that have suffered because of the undue influence and power yielded by one person or other, whether that's a layperson or a pastor or whoever.

Back in the 17th century in England, the kings of England, the Stuart kings, claimed the divine right of kings. That is, they claimed that they were in charge, that they had, in a sense, unfettered power in England, and that was a divine right.

[4 : 50] Possibly going back to the fact that God anointed David as king, a dynastic kingship in ancient Israel and had vast areas of power as king of Israel. But, of course, it was that arrogant claim of the divine right of kings that was one of the contributing factors to the English Civil War.

And, in fact, the loss of monarchy in England for 12 years under two Cromwells before the Restoration in 1660. But thereafter, the power of the kingship of England became more and more limited over time.

It was vested in the lords to a large extent, but finally, in 1911, the power of the lords was, in effect, ceremonial, really. And it was more an elected government and what has evolved, I suppose, into what's often called the Westminster system of government.

But actually, that system is not particularly modern. That is, the system of checks and balances in government and in power and in public office is actually as old as the Old Testament.

And what we find in Deuteronomy, with these two chapters dealing with issues of leadership in the society of ancient Israel, is something that is actually very astute, highly unusual in the ancient world, with the checks and balances of various offices of power and leadership.

[6 : 10] From late in chapter 16 to the end of chapter 18, four groups of leaders are addressed. Judges, kings, priests and prophets. The first is judges, at the end of chapter 16 and into the first half of chapter 17.

We might expect the king to be named first, but he's not. Maybe deliberately putting him in his place. It's the judges, the judicial leaders of ancient Israel.

And see what is said about them. In verse 18 of chapter 16, page 152, You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions.

Now that's the basic principle by which judges are to operate. They render just decisions. It's what we would expect, of course. It's not always, of course, what happens.

So often in human history, modern and ancient, judges and justice is not the norm for various reasons. And so the verse 19 that follows gives some negatives associated with the positive of rendering just decisions.

[7 : 26] In order for there to be just decisions, there are three things that ought not to be in place. You must not distort justice in whatever way, in whatever purpose. You must not show partiality.

You must not accept bribes. And those three negatives of verse 19 reflect some of the temptations towards injustice that any judge would be confronted with.

Where relationships make a judge or any person vulnerable to bias. Think how often you might have been the beneficiary of something that is really not by right yours, but because of somebody you know.

Whether that's in your workplace or in their workplace or even in church life sometimes. Often, the people we know, if they're wealthy and influential, can often yield too much influence over us and bias or skew our judgments and our decisions.

Give us cause to prejudice. So without fear or without favor is in effect how justice is to be exercised. And that's actually the divine pattern.

[8 : 37] What is said in verse 19 about what not should happen what should not happen for judges is premised on the model of God as the judge. And back in Deuteronomy chapter 10, God is a God who shows no partiality, doesn't accept bribes.

God is a God who renders just decisions, that is. And so human judges are underneath the judgship of God. Their judgship is to be modelled on God's fair judgment and justice.

And that's reflected a bit more explicitly in chapter 17. We'll skip over the first paragraph but in 17 verse 8 we get the situation of the difficult case.

Imagine you're out in an Israelite village or town and a case has come to you and it's too hard for you as the local judge to work out the right decision. So there is an appeal.

Well it's not so much an appeal of the person but the judge himself will say this is too hard for me we'll go to a higher court. And so verse 8 says if a judicial decision is too difficult for you to make between one kind of bloodshed and another or one kind of legal riot and another or one kind of assault and another in fact any such matters of dispute in your towns then you shall immediately go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose where you shall consult with the Levitical priests and the judge who's in office in those days and they shall announce to you the decision in the case. [10:01] Now we might say oh that's just a high court system so the judge says this is beyond my competence to deal with I go to a higher judge notice that it involves the priests the Levitical priests are mentioned in verse 9 so it's an incorporation of the religious leadership with the judicial leadership something that's distinctive actually in the Old Testament amongst all the ancient Near Eastern law codes that is an integration of everything under the leadership of God ultimately but notice too that the place is the place that God will choose and back in Deuteronomy 12 that is clearly the place of central worship the equivalent would be to say you go now to St Paul's Cathedral in the centre of Melbourne to bring about judgment well you don't go to the Supreme Court up in the other end of town you go to the cathedral well it's not a cathedral it would be the temple ultimately in Jerusalem but what it shows is that you're coming in before the presence of God and the higher judge and the Levitical priest the religious leadership are bringing down a decision but by being in this place it's reflecting the fact that God actually is the supreme judge God is the one who renders just decisions and actually in one sense it's an appeal to almighty God to bring about proper justice and judgment what then it reflects in all of those laws are that the judges are not free to judge as they like they are bound by God's standards of fairness and impartiality they are bound by God's law to judge and they actually ultimately appeal to God as judge by going to the central place that's mentioned in verses 8 and 9 well then come the laws to do with the kings and these come from chapter 17 verse 14 to the end of chapter 17 the king doesn't come first probably because the judges are essential you need judges but you don't actually need kings in fact Israel at this time hasn't had a king it doesn't have a king and for another 400 years doesn't have a king not until round about 1000 BC does Israel end up with its first king this law doesn't prescribe that Israel is to have a king but rather allows there to be a king so when you've come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it and you say

I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me you may indeed set over you a king that is it's a human request or a human desire of Israel to say we would like a king now the desire is flawed and when it comes later in Israel's history in the book of 1 Samuel to have a king we see that flaw made more explicit that is they want a king like all the other nations which is actually their request voiced here in verse 14 the other nations had kings who were powerful military figures and who were not particularly godly Israel is not to have a king like that although that was actually their first request but notice that their request in verse 14 for a king is matched not by them choosing a king but by God choosing a king see verse 15 you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose God chooses matching their request and they then set over them in a sense in a formal ceremony the king of God's choice they can't appoint a foreigner verse 15 goes on to say it must be an Israelite they're not going to be ruled by foreigners and this is certainly what happened when Israel wanted a king in 1 Samuel 8 onwards

God chose he actually chose a king according to their request that is like the nation Saul not a good king to expose the folly of their request and then Saul was succeeded by a better king David again whom God chose now like the judges this king to be chosen by God and then set over the people isn't a sort of free reign king he's not a king who's got the run of everything he's not a dictator king he's got severe limitations that circumscribe his authority and power so in verses 16 and 17 there are three things that this king must not follow or pursue or be seduced by weapons women and wealth to give them all the same starting letter verse 16 he must not acquire many horses for himself that is the military might of the day we might say nuclear powered submarines and aircraft carriers and jet fighters whatever the latest sequence of numbers or B-52s or whatever they are that would be the modern equivalent he's not to pursue human weapons for human strength that is he's not to rely upon his own military prowess and might rather on

God secondly verse 17 he must not acquire many wives for himself that is so that he's not seduced by them either to worship other gods in idolatry or he's not to pursue lots of wives for the sake of making political alliances a bit like the sort of thrones of Europe are all intermarried to sort of

ostensibly give lots of political alliances it's the early form of the European Union I guess that is your alliance is with God alone he is the one who will provide your defense he is the God alone whom you are to worship and then thirdly the end of verse 17 silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself that is the authority and power of the king resides in the office and is not to be added to by the authority and power of money as well as that of course money is corrupting you cannot serve both God and wealth money sex and power the three standard temptations that any person actually faces whether or not they're a king or a leader and

[16:41] Israel's history reflects the tension of this law its first king flouted God's law disobeyed God's law offered sacrifices he shouldn't have made David for all the high praise that is given him in the Old Testament was not perfect either broke the law of adultery for example and Solomon in particular the king at the greatest expanse of Israel's territory in Old Testament times clearly broke explicitly broke all three of those prohibitions in verses 16 and 17 Solomon was fabulously wealthy had hundreds of wives and as well as that pursued and accumulated great weaponry as well all of that summed up at the end of chapter 17 the king is to be under God's law so in verse 18 when the king has taken the throne of his kingdom he shall have a copy of this law that is the book of

Deuteronomy written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests that is it shows that the priests have some authority authority at one level over the king it shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment either to the right or the left so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel the king is to be a model Israelite all Israel was to meditate on God's word to read it day and night to teach it to others Deuteronomy explicitly says that in chapter 6 and later in chapter 31 Psalm 1 says much the same sort of thing that is what is the model of this kingship of ancient Israel it's not the divine right of kings to rule but rather the divine rule of God over the kings exercised by God's law and of course

Israel's history is tragic at this point Saul breaks the law in many ways leading to the end of his kingship David breaks the law in adultery Solomon breaks the law foolishly with his women and weapons Jeroboam flouts the law by building a golden calf idol Ahab flouts the kings who rule ancient Israel are to rule under God's law that is God is the king he rules by his law and the human kings are his choice and are to exercise their kingship under his kingship in a sense similar to the judges who exercise their judgment under the judgship of God well the third category is the beginning of chapter 18 and these are the priests and the Levites the more explicitly religious leadership of ancient Israel the Levitical priests we're told here as in other parts of the Old Testament have no allotment verse one says or inheritance within

Israel each of the tribes of Israel had an area of land from which they could have their crops and animals and gain some wealth and food and so on not so the but they were dependent upon those tribes for food that is the offerings that people would make in sacrifices and tithes and vows parts of some of those were there for provision for the priests to eat and have food the role of the priest though not specified here is in other parts a role of teaching the law of supervising the sacrificial system of looking after the leadership in the time of military warfare as well as we saw in chapter 17 earlier on having a judicial role in high court type cases as well what this law does is to prevent the religious leadership from becoming economically powerful and when you think about it think of the abuses in the church when the church has become in effect too wealthy medieval christendom of course is the glaring example of that where the wealth of the

Roman church led to huge abuses and corruption and even you could say the same sort of thing sometimes has happened in colonial missionary activity where the wealth of the western church has actually not commended gospel ministry in places that they've taken the gospel to sometimes of course there are great exceptions with good examples but not always but on the other hand this law doesn't either legislate for an impoverished priesthood the priesthood is to be provided for sufficiently through the generosity and gifts of the other tribes giving to ancient Israel's priests they are dependent on them though they have a leadership role over those other tribes that is there's an element of checks and balance going on in fact the principle of providing for the priesthood in ancient Israel is one that Paul adopts in the provision for Christian leadership in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 so like the judges and like the kings the priests were to be under

[22:17] God's law and not over God's law and finally the fourth category are the prophets from verse 9 to the end of chapter 18 verses 9 to 13 detail the pagan equivalents none of which Israel

was to practice they're the soothsayers and the augurs the people who communicate with the dead and so on they are not the way for Israel to go see in verse 14 although these nations that you're about to dispossess give heed to soothsayers and diviners as for you very strong language very strong contrast in those words the Lord your God does not permit you to do so but verse 15 the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet notice again like the kings and indeed like the priests the tribe of Levi is not chosen by the people but chosen by God earlier on in Exodus here to the prophet is chosen by

God not the people so the prophet is God's choice God will raise up for you a prophet like me says Moses Moses becomes the model of what a prophet is to be like that's a model in various facets Moses suffered because of the people's sin as their leader prophet Moses interceded for the people when they sinned Moses himself was not perfect Moses was a mediator between God and the people and that goes back to chapter five in Deuteronomy where they'd heard the people had heard the laws of the Ten commandments given they were afraid of hearing God's voice they said to Moses tell God to talk to you and then you tell us what he says we don't want to hear his voice we're afraid of him that's in fact what's picked up in verse 16 here in this passage this is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said if I hear the voice of the

Lord my God anymore or ever again see this great fire I'll die and the Lord God said to me they are right in what they've said and so he raises up a prophet Moses to intercede for them or mediate for them but the key role that Moses demonstrated that is to be the model for later prophecy was that Moses words are God's words in Deuteronomy there's a very strong intertwining of God's words and Moses words so that there are paragraphs where you can't quite tell who's speaking is it God or Moses at one level it doesn't matter because God's words are Moses words and vice versa Moses was faithful as a prophet in communicating God's words see how verse 18 describes it I'll raise up for them a prophet like you like Moses from among their own people I will put my words in Elijah and so on they're not free to make up what they say they don't have the power or authority to say this is what

I think God's saying and put it in language of God saying this but when you read those books of prophets time and again you hear the expression thus says the Lord that is God's words are the prophets words Amos in particular keeps saying thus says the Lord so like the judges the kings the priests so for the prophets as well they are under God's word not above it their power is limited by God's word they don't have a divine right to rule now one of the things that Deuteronomy I think so brilliantly does the Old Testament does and so different from the ancient near eastern rules of kings and monarchs and authority is draw out a system of checks and balances and though it's not fair simply to say well here are rules for ancient

Israel this is what Australia should be like in one sense the continuity lies more from Israel to the church the principles of checks and balances or power sharing here are important ones power corrupts absolute power corrupts absolutely so they say and so what we find here are checks and balances where the king is actually under the authority of the priest at some point he is under the authority at one level of the prophet at some point because all of all of all of God is under the authority of God God is actually the king God is the judge it's God's words that rule or are to rule ancient Israel so what we find here is a wise constitutional leadership in a sense it doesn't matter whether it's a republic or a monarchy or who the judges are or whatever but there is a power sharing going on so that the abuses we often see in ancient

[27 : 32] Israel the contest of power going on not least with prophets and kings so Nathan goes to David to challenge him Elijah goes to Ahab Jeremiah to Zedekiah and so on many examples through the Old Testament where the leadership is in contest because one aspect of the leadership is abusing and sitting over God's word and not under it well none of God's chosen leaders was perfect even the best kings failed Josiah Hezekiah were the best kings David they failed even the greatest prophets sinned Moses sinned and was precluded from entering the promised land Elijah was rebuked for his despair and depression perhaps he and Moses being perhaps the two greatest prophets in the Old Testament the balance of power was deliberately abused at times but the checks and balances were there to limit that although it didn't always work

I guess well the principle of power sharing or checks and balances in leadership seems to be a godly principle that is worth upholding when society or rulers or governments seek to silence the opposition alarm bells ought to ring on whatever issue is being raised think think of Henry II and his

famous expression of who will rid me of this troublesome priest leading to his courtiers killing the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas a Becket think of Idi Amin doing away with Archbishop Janani Luan in Uganda Hitler and Bonhoeffer and others that he put to death they don't have to be Christians who are challenging the government either think of Tan Shui the leader of Burma's generals and the silencing they try to produce on Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma and think of that very brave Catholic Archbishop of Zimbabwe

Archbishop Nkube who's just been in Australia arriving back this weekend in Zimbabwe to the wrath of Robert Mugabe because of what he's spoken out against him and even from time to time in Australia where we have so many checks and balances it does alarm me when we hear of opposition being spoken to a government principle being so roundly dismissed or being told to go into your corner sometimes when the church speaks out and the dismissal that that is given by political leaders in our country there are warnings you see for those who lead that our power is always to be limited under God's word but limited by others in office as well and we should rejoice in the protections that power sharing and checks and balances give us and I think in a society we should make sure that we have an independent judiciary and an independent church and state so that not too much power is in the hands of one government indeed even in

Anglican church polity it seems to me that though sometimes it's confused and ambiguous there is a sense in which it's trying to keep a balance of power leadership authority between the ministers and the church wardens vestry and leaders of churches as well a healthy sort of balance so that's an important principle that these laws seem to be indicating the other thing that comes out is the strong preservation of God's word is the ultimate power and so the judges the kings the priests and the prophets are all to be under God's word in the exercise of their power now it's hard to just translate that immediately into a sort of secular country like Australia in a way it's easier to do that to the church but what these laws are showing is that the leadership of God's people must be under God's word last Wednesday was the 25th anniversary of the very first sermon I ever preached and I remember the week before in fact the two weeks before I preached that sermon it was a very stressful time very stressful not just because it's my first sermon but the thing that filled me with dread was that as a young novice really about to preach for the first sermon my fear at overstepping the authority of

God's word I'm thankful to God that still that's my biggest fear when I preach not that my sermon preparation is quite as arduous as that very first one was and I don't quite sweat as much and sit up all night as I used to do then but still I think the greatest fear as I think it ought to be is overstepping God's word as a leader of God's people that I'm under God's word and that what I preach and do must be under God's word that's what rules us and that's what ought to govern us in all that we do but finally there is one who combined all these offices no one in the Old Testament could be a king and the priest and a prophet and a judge it was impossible at least because the priests were Levites and the king was from the tribe of where David was from Judah but there was one ultimately who combined all four the judge who is coming back to judge the living and the dead is the same one who is the king descended from

[33 : 17] David the king of the Jews who is the same one who is the great high priest that we have in the heavens and who is the same one that is the anticipated prophet like Moses all power in one person did absolute power corrupt absolutely not at all in that case because he was sinless and perfect unlike any other human being how did he yield all power on a cross suffering interceding obeying God's word even unto death speaking the truth to the end that's the model of leadership that God demonstrates it's the model of leadership of God's people that the leaders of God's people are to emulate that's scary leadership let's pray

God our father we thank you that you are our king our judge we thank you that you have spoken so clearly your authoritative word we thank you for the leadership of your son Jesus Christ our prophet priest king and judge make us like him in living under your word make those of us leaders obedient and subservient to your word that your people may be led in justice and truth for Jesus sake amen please and thank you to you