

2 Samuel 18:1 - 19:8

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 01] Tonight we're looking at 2 Samuel chapter 18, so if you would turn there in the Bible, page 269 in the Pew Bibles.

One of the most challenging aspects of being a parent, I find, is raising our kids in a way that's characterized both by justice and mercy.

Sometimes on nights when our children have, let's say, had a hard day or misbehaved, my wife and I will sometimes sit down after they go to bed and sometimes we wonder, were we too harsh?

Did we overreact out of our own frustration? Did we treat them as if they were being rebellious when really they were mostly tired and distracted and just being childish?

On other days we ask ourselves, were we too lenient? Did we keep on giving them extra chances and say, if you do this one more time, I'm going to blank, and then they do it one more time, and if you do it one more time, I'm going to blank.

[1 : 13] Or did we just give in to their demands to avoid a meltdown? Oh, yes, it's happened. All the parents say amen. Right?

Did we express justice at the expense of mercy, or did we express mercy at the expense of justice? Of course, this tension is not just a parent thing, right?

We can experience the same challenge in relationships with friends, neighbors, bosses, employees, co-workers. If something isn't quite right, do you confront and pursue justice?

Or do you overlook and forgive? Or if you're in law enforcement, working in the legal field, is the goal of law enforcement to punish people who have committed crimes against others?

Or should the focus be on rehabilitation and restoring offenders to society? Mercy. Mercy and justice are hard to hold together in all these cases.

[2 : 18] And in this passage we're looking at tonight, that's exactly what we'll see, in particular in the character of David and the character of Joab. Now, what we'll see in this passage tonight, let me just give a little background where we are in the book.

So, in this section of 2 Samuel, it's focused on David's son Absalom, who has mounted a rebellion and organized a conspiracy to overthrow his father and seize the throne for himself.

So, Absalom gained the loyalty of most of the people. He declared himself king in Hebron. He rode into Jerusalem. David had to flee for his life into the wilderness.

And Absalom is now plotting to kill David and bring down David's men. So, what we're going to see tonight is first how it goes with Absalom. And then we'll see David and Joab's response, where we'll see the tension between mercy and justice in their response to Absalom.

So, first, we're going to look at Absalom's demise. And this is verse 1 to 18. So, I'm going to read the first half of the chapter now. Let's bring it verse 1.

[3 : 29] Then chapter 18, verse 1. Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent out the army, one-third under the command of Joab, one-third under the command of Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one-third under the command of Ittai, the Gittite.

And the king said to the men, I myself will also go out with you. But the men said, you shall not go out, for if we flee, they won't care about us. If half of us die, they won't care about us.

But you are worth 10,000 of us. Therefore, it is better that you send us help from the city. The king said to them, whatever seems best to you, I will do. So the king stood at the side of the gate while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands.

And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom. And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

So the army went out into the field against Israel and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David and the loss there was great on that day, 20,000 men.

[4 : 34] The battle spread over the face of all the country and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword. And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David.

Absalom was riding on his mule and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak and his head caught fast in the oak and he was suspended between heaven and earth. While the mule that was under him went on.

And a certain man saw it and told Joab, behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak. Joab said to the man who told him, what? You saw him? Why then did you not strike him there to the ground?

I would have been glad to give you 10 pieces of silver and a belt. But the man said to Joab, even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son.

For in our hearing, the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, for my sake protect the young man Absalom. On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life and there is nothing hidden from the king, then you yourself would have stood aloof.

[5 : 37] Joab said, I won't waste time like this with you. And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. And 10 young men, Joab's armor bearers surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

Then Joab blew the trumpet and all the troops came back from pursuing Israel for Joab restrained them. And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones and all Israel fled, everyone to his own home.

Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the king's valley for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance. He called the pillar after his own name and it is called Absalom's monument to this day.

So here we see Absalom's downfall, right? Verse 1 to 5, David gets the troops ready for battle, sends them out. Verse 6 to 8, the battle is briefly described.

David's side decisively wins. But the majority of this section is focused on Absalom. And what we see here is that Absalom's demise was an expression of God's judgment on his pride and his self-centeredness.

[6 : 46] If you look back in chapter 17, verse 14, what we looked at last week, the end of that verse says, the Lord, it was the Lord's purpose to bring harm upon Absalom.

And so what happened to Absalom wasn't an accident, that it was an expression of God's righteous judgment against his pride. Now, how do we see that, you might wonder?

Well, in the story of Absalom, we've seen he's, for many people, he was a likable guy. He was young, handsome, had a charismatic personality. It says he stole the hearts of most of the people of Israel.

But if you read the whole story about Absalom, there is not one positive statement about his character. There's positive statements about his looks.

There's not one positive statement about his moral or spiritual or personal character. He was fundamentally proud and rebellious and self-centered.

[7 : 44] He wanted to set up his own kingdom at the expense of David's. And what we see here is his pride led to his downfall. One of the things Absalom liked to do is he liked to grow his hair out, and his hair grew real long.

And once a year, he would have his hair cut in public, and he'd weigh his hair. It'd be a few pounds. And he did this whole thing with his head, right?

But what do we see here? His head gets caught in the oak tree. His pride and glory is what ensnares him.

And the way he died indicated that he died as a rebel who was under God's curse. How do we see that?

Well, first, he's hanging in a tree. In the book of Deuteronomy, it says anyone who's hanged in a tree is under the curse of God. And second, he's buried under a big pile of rocks, verse 17, which is the same way that other people who had rebelled against God were buried.

[8 : 56] In particular, if you look at Achan in the book of Joshua, who had rebelled against God's command, he was executed and put under a pile of stones.

Joshua 7, 26. The king of Ai, Joshua 8, 29, was hanged on a tree, and then they raised over his body a great heap of stones. Absalom, like Cain, had murdered his brother, Amnon, in cold blood.

Like Korah, who had rebelled against Moses in the wilderness, he had set himself against God's anointed leader. And like Saul, he had sought to exalt himself at the expense of obeying God.

The last word about Absalom is he built a monument in his own honor. It's exactly what King Saul did at the moment of his disobedience against God.

So there's a warning in the story of Absalom. He had great natural abilities, but his pride led to his downfall. But what I want to look at tonight is not mostly about Absalom, but I want to look at Joab and David's response to Absalom and his demise.

[10 : 12] At first, I want to look at David's response, which is in the next section. The next section tells about how the news of Absalom's death is brought to David.

So let's read verse 19. Then Ahmaez, the son of Zadok, who was one of David's longtime friends, said, let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies.

And Joab, who is the army commander, said to him, you are not to carry news today. You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news for the king's son is dead. Then Joab said to the Cushite, go tell the king what you have seen.

The Cushite bowed before Joab and ran. Then Ahmaez, the son of Zadok, said again to Joab, come what may, let me also run after the Cushite. And Joab said, why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the news?

Come what may, he said, I will run. So he said to him, run. Then Ahmaez ran by the way of the plain and outran the Cushite. Now David was sitting between the two gates. And the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall.

[11 : 16] And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, if he's alone, there's news in his mouth. In other words, not a bunch of soldiers fleeing from battle, but it's a messenger.

And he drew nearer and nearer. The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, see, another man running alone. The king said, he also brings news. The watchman said, I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahmaez, the son of Zadok.

And the king said, he's a good man. And he comes with good news. Then Ahmaez cried out to the king, all is well. And he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said, blessed be the Lord, your God, who has delivered up the men who raised up their hand against my Lord, the king.

And the king said, is it well with the young man, Absalom? Ahmaez answered, when Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was.

And the king said, turn aside and stand here. So he turned aside and stood still. And behold, the Cushite came and the Cushite said, good news for my Lord, the king, for the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you.

[12 : 22] The king said to the Cushite, is it well with the young man, Absalom? And the Cushite answered, may the enemies of my Lord, the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man.

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, oh, my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, would that I had died instead of you.

Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. It was told Joab, behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom. So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people. For the people heard that day, the king is grieving for his son.

And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. The king covered his face and the king cried with a loud voice, oh, my son, Absalom.

Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. David's response to Absalom is mercy at the expense of justice.

[13 : 28] If you look back at verse five, what does he order? Joab and the army commanders, he says, deal gently for my sake with the young man, Absalom. Right?

Even though Absalom had murdered one of his brothers, organized a conspiracy to overthrow David, was now gathering an army to strike down David and all his followers, David said, deal gently with him for my sake.

Now, what do we make of David's mercy toward Absalom? On the one hand, David's heart of mercy toward Absalom, despite his pride and rebellion, reflects the heart of God.

Psalms 103 says, On the one hand, David's mercy toward Absalom reflects the heart of God.

But on the other hand, you might wonder, does David's command, deal gently with Absalom, make sense at all? It would be like saying to the allied troops in World War II, deal gently with Hitler, if you find him.

[14 : 53] But if you want to deal gently with Hitler, why are you fighting the war in the first place? It's completely unrealistic. But isn't it also somewhat unjust?

Are all Absalom's soldiers more guilty than he is that you're willing to kill them, but not him? There's this tension.

And in verse 19 to 32, we have this long description of the two messengers racing to carry news to David. You might wonder, you know, why does the author spend all this time describing these two messengers?

Well, the tension is building, right? How will David respond to this news? That's why there's this whole long section. It's building tension. How is David going to respond? That's why Joab says to Ahimeaz, no, no, no, you are not supposed to be the messenger today.

Because this will not be good news to David. Joab knows that David made an order and he completely disregarded it. And Joab also knows what David had done in the past.

[15:59] When messengers came to him, joyfully proclaiming his enemy's demise. A messenger came to David, joyfully proclaiming, Saul has been killed in battle.

And actually, the messenger claimed to have killed Saul himself. And David executed the messenger. And David said, oh, no. You are not going to get ahead in my kingdom by gloating over the death of my enemy.

The right response is to weep. So that's why Joab didn't want Ahimeaz, David's longtime loyal friend, to carry the message.

He wanted the Cushite, who is a foreigner, to do it. So, verse 24 to 27, right, the perspective shifts to David. David's waiting. And he's hoping for good news.

And you can tell he's hoping for good news. Because he sees the messenger and it's, right, a guy running. That would have been reasonable to say he's a messenger, right, rather than a bunch of soldiers fleeing from battle.

[17:03] But then he says he's a good man and he comes with good news. Now, think about that. That is irrational hopefulness. He comes with, he's going to have good news.

It's like, right, it's positive self-talk when you have no reason to believe what it's going to be. David's hoping. Really, really, really hoping that there will be good news for him.

And the news he's looking for doesn't have anything to do with the rest of the soldiers. It has to do with one person. He asked the same question to both messengers. Is it well with the young man Absalom?

That's what he cares about. He doesn't seem to care about anything else. And so finally we come to the climax of this passage.

In verse 33. When David hears the news. And we see his response. He erupts in inconsolable grief.

[18:08] Now, we've seen David grieving a few times in the book of Samuel. He grieved over Saul and Jonathan.

And he actually composed an extended poetic tribute to them. He grieved over Abner. And again, composed a briefer public tribute to Abner.

He grieved over his son, his child who had died. Just a few days or months old. And he spoke a few words.

I will go to him. He will not return to me. But here, Absalom's death seems to push David over the edge. David's just repeating.

Absalom, my son. My son. Absalom. Absalom. I wish I had died instead of you. David seems to be almost defeated and unable to rise again.

[19:17] And David's people seem to be defeated as well. The victories turn to mourning. The people come back from the battle who had laid their lives on the line with their heads hanging in shame.

Even though they had won the victory. So what do we make of this? His response to Absalom. Well, there's a parallel between David as a father and Eli, who is a father in the book of Samuel.

Eli's at the beginning of the book of Samuel, 1 Samuel. And David here as a father is toward the end. And both of these fathers knew the Lord and had sons who rebelled.

And they failed to warn or discipline their children. So Eli's sons were priests. And they were sleeping with the women who served in the tabernacle.

They were taking advantage of the women there. They were basically bribing people and stealing stuff. And Eli sort of gave them a polite warning but just never really did anything to remove them from their position or to follow through with them.

[20 : 44] And we see the same pattern with David. Right? Amnon violates his half-sister. David doesn't say a word even though he's very angry.

He doesn't say a word to him. And then Absalom takes matters into his own hands and murders Amnon. And David never confronts. He never says a word about what Absalom had done.

Even though he murdered his brother in cold blood at a family party. What you see here is David is sadly, tragically, reaping the results of not confronting the sin of his sons.

And both Eli and David are in a similar place. They're both sitting at the city gate, which is a place of authority. And they're waiting for news from the battle. And Eli hears the news of his sons.

And both of his sons have died in battle. And that's the day. And it says he fell off his chair and he broke his neck and died. Now with David, he doesn't die immediately.

[21 : 59] But he sort of crumples over. He says, I wish I had died instead of you, Absalom. It's as if he's saying, I don't want to be king anymore.

And I think David's guilt, his knowledge of his sin with Bathsheba and his failure to discipline his sons and how that had sort of perpetuated itself.

His guilt exacerbated his grief. So on the one hand, we have David grieving for his rebellious lost son.

And that's entirely appropriate. Right? It's right to grieve. Even over the death of an enemy. Or a rebel.

And certainly over the death of a child. But on the other hand, we see David's pattern where he never confronted his children.

[23 : 03] He never held on to justice. He failed to hold on to justice. And so his mercy at the expense of justice ended up being not actually very merciful in the end.

And left to himself, it seems like David is fallen and unable to rise again. But not quite.

Thankfully, David's not left to himself. There's Joab. Verse 5. Joab comes to David in an unexpected way. Then Joab came into the house of the king and said, You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you.

For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you. For today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise.

Go out and speak kindly to your servants. For I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now.

[24 : 20] Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, Behold, the king is sitting in the gate, and all the people came before the king. Now Joab is the opposite of David.

If David is mercy at the expense of justice, Joab is justice and no mercy. And this is true not just here in this incident, but through the whole book of Samuel.

Joab is the realist. He gets things done. He makes things happen. He leads the army into battle. He gets rid of enemies of David. Sometimes he's a bit of a hothead, impatient, and trigger happy.

Once David said about Joab and his brothers, he said, I was gentle today, and these men, Joab and his brothers, they are more severe than I. And David struggled with Joab's severity in contrast to his gentleness.

But what we see here is that Joab had the sense of justice that David lacked. Joab rightly saw that there was no way that Absalom could stay alive and the kingdom remained securely and peacefully in David's hands.

[25 : 32] Joab realized that as long as Absalom is alive, there is going to be an unending civil war. And we will never be at peace. And he was right about that.

Right? And what happens when Absalom dies? Joab immediately calls off the war. He says, we're done fighting. Absalom's death brings peace to the nation. And in that way, Joab's sense of justice was in harmony with God's purpose to bring righteous judgment on Absalom's pride.

But, right, that's why Joab's justice is good. But, his justice came at the expense of mercy. And, if we look here, we see that Joab's concern for justice wasn't pure.

Do you notice the dialogue between the man who sees Absalom hanging in a tree and Joab? Joab says, if you would have killed him, I would have given you a prize.

And the guy says, well, yeah, right, but then the king would have found out that I completely ignored his orders and you would have kept quiet and let me pay the price.

[26 : 53] And Joab doesn't deny it. He just says, I don't want to deal with, I don't want to talk like this. Right? And then what does Joab do? Joab doesn't actually kill Absalom.

He just stabs him and then he gets his ten armor bearers to all strike him and kill him. So, it's not even clear who killed Absalom. So, he diffuses the responsibility.

You see, Joab is justice at the expense of mercy, but his justice isn't really justice either. And that's sort of what we see. When you have mercy at the expense of justice, in the end, it's not completely merciful.

And when you have justice at the expense of mercy, in the end, it's not completely just. And then we see Joab's words to David at the end.

Right? On the one hand, it sounds incredibly harsh. David's grieving the death of his son. And Joab is basically like, you better get out there or we're gonna, everyone's gonna ditch you tonight.

[28 : 02] Right? It's maybe a little overstated. On the other hand, it says the majority of the, the majority of the nation of Israel had sided with Absalom. Right? Joab's concern wasn't completely unfounded.

Joab knew that it was a very precarious situation. And Joab says, David, you're a father and you're also a king. And you need to be both of those today.

All right? So, obviously, Joab's, Joab's very harsh. But on the other hand, it was exactly what David needed to hear in one sense.

Right? His speech was sort of like a big bucket of ice cold water thrown on a very weary and discouraged person who's just trying to go to sleep. It's extremely unpleasant.

Extremely harsh. But it also is, somehow, it wakes you up. That's what Joab did to David. So, we have these two characters, right?

[29 : 03] We've got David, mercy at the expense of justice, Joab, justice at the expense of mercy. Now, left to their own devices, I think each of them would have self-destructed.

Right? David would have lost the kingdom to Absalom or just crumpled over and died right here. And Joab would have killed everybody else until somebody killed him.

Right? But together, they really irritate each other sometimes. David's like, I don't know. I just, I don't know what to do with these guys.

But they're actually, they actually have what each other needs. So, this is a bit of a side point, but let me just say this. Sometimes, your spouse or your co-worker or your brother or sister or your fellow church member who most irritates and annoys you may have exactly the character trait that you need to see and be shaped by.

And you may look at them and see their weaknesses and their flaws. And you may be exactly right, but they might also have exactly what you need and don't realize.

[30 : 24] Maybe you're like David and you need a Joab. Maybe you're like Joab, you need a David. David. But of course, the whole story is meant to raise this question. Can mercy and justice actually coexist?

And not just be opposed to each other? Well, Psalm 85 speaks poetically of a day when one day they will.

It says, Psalm 85 verse 10 says, steadfast love and faithfulness meet. Righteousness or justice and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground and righteousness looks down from the sky.

So the Psalm is talking about a day when righteousness and peace, justice and mercy will one day embrace. And the Gospel of John in the New Testament says, Jesus came from the Father full of grace or mercy and truth or faithfulness.

Right? Jesus was full of justice and full of mercy without compromising either one or the other. And without being polluted by, on David's side, self-pity and on Joab's side, self-protection.

[31 : 53] Jesus is full of justice. Right? Jesus doesn't back down. He's uncompromising in his demands for loyalty.

Jesus says, whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

You see, Jesus is worthy of our absolute loyalty and undivided allegiance. Even if your career crashes and burns, even if your best friend ditches the faith, even if your son or daughter walks away from the Lord, even if your spouse betrays you or abandons you, even if your child dies.

Jesus is worthy of our loyalty and allegiance because he is the king. But Jesus is not only the king of justice who commands our absolute allegiance.

He's also our savior, our merciful savior. David wept. Jesus wept. And Jesus wept not just over his friend Lazarus, but also over the city of Jerusalem when he approached the city.

[33 : 22] And he said, oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how long have I, how have I longed to gather you under the wings of God?

you see, David wanted, David said, I wish I had died instead of you. But you know, David couldn't die instead of Absalom because both of them had sinned.

And both of them were ultimately facing death. But Jesus could because he had no sin. and he did and his mercy for us.

That he died instead of us. He took our place so that we could have mercy and be forgiven and be received home. Romans, the book of Romans says God put forward Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness or God's justice so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. And then Paul in Romans goes on to say God shows his love and that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

[34 : 43] You see, in Jesus Christ God has shown his justice and he has shown his love. He's called us to himself and he has laid down his life for us so that we who are proud rebels might come and be part of his kingdom.

Let's pray. Lord, so often we struggle to hold on to both justice and mercy and so often we experience the bitter fruit in our lives when one takes the upper hand over the other.

When we hold on to one at the expense of the other and then even that one that we hold on to is tainted by our own self-pity or self-protection by our own pride by our own fear.

But Lord Jesus we thank you that in you justice and mercy meet together. We thank you that you are a God whom we can trust.

We thank you that you are a God who laid down his life for us. Lord, we pray that we would worship you tonight as a king who is full of mercy and justice and we pray that more and more that as your spirit dwells in us that our lives would be characterized by both mercy and justice and that you would give us the wisdom to know how to express those realities in our lives day to day.

[36 : 37] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.