

Sermon Given by

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2 Samuel 9 - "Dining on High Table"

I remember hearing Mark Ashton, vicar at St Andrew the Great in Cambridge comment more than once about a conversation he had with someone who wasn't a believing Christian and their reason for not following Christ was that 'Christianity is a religion of dos and don'ts... where the dos all begin with don't'. It is one of the most popular misconceptions about the Christian faith that we come to the Bible simply to find proof-texts which give us commands to obey, examples to follow and warnings to heed.

The resurgent atheism of our own day delights to find flaws, as it sees it, in the commands of the Bible. 'How ridiculous of God to command Israel to stone Sabbath breakers.' And because it assumes that we take all those commands in the flat as directly applicable to us, it advises us to reject the whole package. All on the assumption that Christianity is a religion of dos and don'ts.

You see the same thing in the comment of that well known modern philosopher, Homer Simpson, who was struggling to remember the name of a well known faith: 'You know...' he said, 'the one with all the well-meaning rules which don't work in real life... Oh... Christianity!' That's the same misunderstanding.

Well, whether you are a Christian or whether you are frankly sceptical about Christianity because you dislike its moral standards, I hope over time you will be convinced that there is much more to the Christian faith than dos and don'ts.

We easily bring that type of misunderstanding to a chapter like 2 Samuel 9. We reduce it to the level of moral example: 'Be kind like David' – and everyone leaves church in one of two states – feeling smug because they think they have done that or feeling wretched because they know they haven't.

But that is to overlook the significance of the great theme of covenant in this section of the book. Two weeks ago we looked at Chapter 7 and the remarkable covenant God made with David: '*Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.*' (2 Sam 7:16) 'My covenant love will never be taken away from your offspring', God had promised.

And with those covenant promises still ringing in his ears, David now promises covenant love to Mephibosheth.

So of course this is a chapter about the 'milk of **human** kindness' on one level; but it is even more important for the light it sheds on **God's** amazing covenant love. David is God's chosen king of God's chosen people – and therefore when he behaves as he ought to behave, not surprisingly we will find that David acts like God. And this chapter will have huge encouragement for us about the security and privileges we enjoy if we live under the covenant.

Let's look first at the power covenant exercises...

The power covenant exercises

The chapter starts in verse 1 with David asking a question: ¹ *David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"*

And if you have a good memory you may well pick up the allusion to a promise made to Jonathan, some fifteen or twenty years earlier. It had been made at the lowest point in the relationship between David and his predecessor on the throne, King Saul. David had suffered at least one attempt on his life and yet God's promise that he would be king was known to Saul's son Jonathan. And he made David promise under oath that when he became king he would show kindness to Jonathan and his descendants. Which David willingly did.

Now he could perhaps have said to himself now that the throne is his and Saul and Jonathan are dead that this oath was unimportant: 'it was just a ceremony, it happened more than fifteen years ago.' Or he could have rationalised the importance politically about doing nothing to threaten national security: how could it possibly be wise to show favours to survivors of a previous rival dynasty? A u-turn from the promise was surely demanded by the new circumstances.

But he didn't do that. He didn't even simply live and let live – he considered that the oath he had made obligated him actually to seek out any living descendant of Jonathan's actively to do good to them. It wasn't enough merely to stop short of killing them.

Hence the enquiry of verse 1. Let's carry on with the story as it unfolds from verse 2 onwards.

² *Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They called him to appear before David, and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?"*
"Your servant," he replied.

³ *The king asked, "Is there no one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?"*
Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet."

We could easily pass over that detail, but we shouldn't; because the accident which left Mephibosheth crippled has been mentioned earlier on in 2 Samuel. It all happened when a national disaster occurred and the Philistines had defeated the Israelite army at Mount Gilboa... in the battle in which Saul and Jonathan had been killed.

Mephibosheth had been a boy of five at the time and as the invading army of Philistines swept into Israel, Mephibosheth's nanny had picked him up to run for their lives and then in the chaos and panic had dropped him. The resulting injury was one he never recovered from: 'he is crippled in both feet'.

David is quick to respond to what he hears in verse 4

⁴ *"Where is he?" the king asked.*
Ziba answered, "He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar."

⁵ *So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.*

Lo Debar is probably a place up North, on the south-east of Lake Galilee – across the Jordan from the main geographical area of Israel. In all likelihood Mephibosheth had tried to put as big a distance between himself and David just for safety's sake.

'Live and let live' really was an option for David – but he arranges for Mephibosheth to be brought – no matter that the promise was a long long time ago and the son of Jonathan lives a long long way away. That is the power which covenant exercises.

This is something, sadly, which our culture doesn't understand. Do you remember that beautiful, ugly film *Out of Africa*. Beautiful scenery with ugly morals! There's one scene with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford talking on the beach. She wants him to marry her. And Robert Redford asks her: 'Do you think I'll love you more because of a piece of paper?'

That's what we think: a covenant is just a scrap of paper – a mere formality.

Robert Redford's misunderstanding is that the point of a marriage covenant is to guarantee love's **security** not intensity of emotion.

Love that truly loves is willing to commit itself, to take on obligations forever, so that the other party can stand secure in that love.

If we are Christians there are all sorts of covenants we make, with varying degrees of solemnity. We do it to enter into marriage, yes. But we do it at other times: I'm aware that I must make public promises next week at Rosie and Sheila's baptism. Many of us made promises to be faithful in prayer and Bible teaching when we commissioned our different team members back in September. Perhaps some of us will make pledges to give a certain amount financially at Gift Day; or we hear some news about a Christian brother or sister suffering and we promise to pray. And we don't keep such promises because it is dramatic, but because it is faithful. It doesn't always feel good to keep covenants. We do it because we promised to.

But why? The answer may have passed you by in David's question to Ziba in verse 3; so let me re-read that verse with special emphasis: ³ *The king asked, "Is there no one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show **God's** kindness?"*

David's covenant kindness was a reflection of God's covenant kindness. All of **our** promises have a natural shelf-life of around seventy years maximum. And overshadowing them all is the covenant of our promise-making, promise-keeping God.

The God who promised an eternal kingdom to David and again who had us in mind millennia later when he made that promise. And he knew exactly what it would cost him one day to keep that long-distance promise with us in mind. It would cost him the death of his Son. And still he kept the promise. That is the power covenant exercises.

Notice next, please, **the person covenant embraces**.

The person covenant embraces.

Will you notice please, as I read verses 6-8 the emphasis on who it is that receives this covenant love from David.

⁶ *When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honour.*

*David said, "Mephibosheth!"
"Your servant," he replied.*

⁷ *"Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."*

⁸ *Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"*

Up to verse 6 we haven't heard the name of the person David must show kindness to – but in verse 6 – 8 we are reminded of his family-tree. Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, son of Saul. This is the narrator laying it on with a shovel to say: do you realise what we are talking about here. It's not just any old promise being kept here: this is David keeping a promise to his sworn enemy. OK he loved Jonathan; but who was Jonathan's father: Saul.

No wonder David had to re-assure him in verse 7: '*Don't be afraid*'. He had every reason to be afraid. When a new dynasty came to the throne there were no questions asked, all survivors of the outgoing dynasty were normally eliminated. But not in this case.

David had refused to kill Saul because he would not raise a hand against the Lord's anointed. He had not needed to kill Saul's sons, – three had been killed in battle against the Philistines and one last one, Ish-Bosheth, had been killed by two thugs supposedly on his own side. On each occasion, David had made it plain that he took no pleasure in their deaths.

And here he will not sanction Mephibosheth's death, even though Saul's blood runs in his veins. And Mephibosheth has done not a single thing to make any peace with David. He wasn't seeking out David; he was in hiding, an endangered species, an enemy.

Now is that not again a reflection of the one who shows steadfast love to his enemies? So I wonder if you can see yourself by nature in that category - enemies. Romans 5:10 says that '*when we were **enemies**, we were reconciled to God*'...

We will never appreciate the kindness of God until we grasp that we do not deserve it at all. Because by nature we have all rebelled against him, rejected his right to rule over us and usurped his place of authority by trying to run life our way without him.

We all naturally think too highly of ourselves. There is that story about a young girl sitting in her father's lap and saying to him: 'Daddy, you are handsome'. And he preened himself and thought what a charming girl she was... and right. And then she went on. 'You are handsome, Daddy... And I am Gretel'.

We have far too high an opinion of ourselves and we could all do with a dose of the humility which Mephibosheth showed towards David, when he called himself a 'dead dog'. If we live in God's world without acknowledging God then our lives are not just 'slightly lacking', we are his enemies: traitors against God's rightful ruler, Jesus. And only when it begins to dawn on us that he enters into covenant with us as his sworn enemies, because he has taken that

enmity on himself at the cross, when Jesus dies there for us, only then we can appreciate the wonder of this covenant. So we must take seriously the person covenant embraces.

But there is still more to feast on here. And feasting is precisely the point: will you notice lastly **the provision covenant makes** as I read verses from verse 9 onwards.

The provision covenant makes

⁹ Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, "I have given your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. ¹⁰ You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master's grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table." (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

Notice that a staff of no fewer than 36 people is required to manage the estate of Saul for Mephibosheth: it was a job for life for Ziba and his fifteen sons and his twenty servants – 36 people in all. So an endowment is being made over to Mephibosheth which would have given him considerable prosperity. David didn't have to do it, because as King, all Saul's property had legally come to him. But he did it.

However the emphasis isn't really placed there. The phrase which gets repeated emphasis is the idea that Mephibosheth gets to eat at the kings' table. Let me read the last three verses of the chapter so you can see it

¹¹ Then Ziba said to the king, "Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do." So Mephibosheth ate at David's ^[a] table like one of the king's sons.

¹² Mephibosheth had a young son named Mica, and all the members of Ziba's household were servants of Mephibosheth. ¹³ And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet.

You see it wasn't enough for David to send him off to his grandfather's estate with a casual wave of the hand. He wanted to **see** Mephibosheth, sitting at his table. Every time he saw him it would be a reminder of Jonathan and relationships mattered to him.

So you get that lovely phrase in verse 11 that he ate at David's table like one of the king's sons. Which he wasn't, by right. That was a thoroughly undeserved privilege. And almost to make it more poignant still the repetition of his handicap at the end of the chapter: he always ate at the king's table and he was crippled in both feet.

This is a rags to riches story, where the riches are not just material prosperity, but a little emblem of the inclusive, wholesome warmth of relationships which God offers to his people.

He is the God who adopts us into his family with the status of sons and heirs. And you can imagine how much that truth means to me as an adoptive parent.

He is the God who says in Isaiah 55:1-3...¹ *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.*

² *Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.*

³ *Give ear and come to me;
hear me, that your soul may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.*

The God who says in Revelation 3:20. '*Here I am: I stand at the door and knock – if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and h with me*'.

By all means see this chapter as a call to be generous like David. But Christianity is not a list of Dos and don'ts. The good news in this chapter calls on us primarily to be like Mephibosheth, not David and to let God **do** something wonderful for us, in the costly provision covenant makes.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)