

Don't Be A Politician

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Our word politics comes from the Greek word *polis*, which literally means "city." *Polis* is normally used to indicate the ancient Greek city-states like Athens and Sparta. These cities would have a fortified city center built on a hill or a harbor and they controlled surrounding areas. And they were not governed by kings or dictators, but by their citizens. As time went on, *polis* came to mean the citizens themselves.

In our daily language, we still see *polis* as a suffix on the names of many cities such as Metropolis, Illinois. I do not know if the kids remember stopping there on the way to the feast one time. We were traveling with Collins' and stopped to see the home of Superman. Metropolis, in effect, means Metro City. Or Minneapolis, Minnesota, Annapolis, Maryland, Indianapolis, Indiana, Kannapolis, North Carolina, and so on.

Polis is also the basis of our English words police, policy, and as I have already said, politics.

Now this English word "politics" is defined as "the activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power." You can see the thread back to ancient Greece in the first half of that definition, "governing an area." But notice the definition went on to add that politics also means "the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power." That is what we seem to key on today. People looking for power.

Wikipedia says, "Politics is the way that people living in groups make decisions." In an ideal world, sure, but in our society, it seems that politicians are making decisions based on polling data or how much money you received from special interests or how close to election time it is.

Merriam Webster defines politician as, "A person experienced in the art or science of government." That sounds great. Very nice, very classy. So how did politician become a dirty word? Continuing in the Merriam Webster website, they say it has a secondary meaning of, "A person primarily interested in political office for selfish or other narrow, usually shortsighted reasons." They go on to say that it has meant that for as long as the word has existed.

"Politician" entered the English language at the end of the 16th century, and it was formed by adding the suffix "ian" to the adjective politic. The first time the word shows up in a dictionary, hundreds of years ago, one of its meanings is, "A politic person, especially a shrewd and crafty schemer." So for hundreds of years, the word politician has been something of a dirty word. People seeking power for their own advancement and personal gain. The satirist Ambrose Bierce, offered a definition of politician in his 1911 book, *The Devil's Dictionary*. Now this language is a bit stilted, but this is very clever. He is defining politician. "An eel in the fundamental mud upon which the superstructure of organized society is reared. When he wriggles, he mistakes the agitation of his tail for the trembling of the edifice." Very clever.

So if you have seen or heard any of the impeachment hearings going on now in America, you have seen dozens of eels wriggling in the mud and thinking they are whales shaping history. That seems to me to be the fundamental flaw of politicians—pride. Even more than avarice, even more than a lust for power, although those run close behind.

In January 1952, General Dwight D. Eisenhower had zero interest in running for president. Supporters of his put his name on the Republican ballot for the New Hampshire primary for president without his permission. At that time, few Americans knew or even cared what political party he belonged to. But his non-existent candidacy was so popular that 24 newspapers promptly endorsed him. Senator Paul Douglas, an Illinois Democrat, suggested both parties ought to nominate Eisenhower just with different running mates. The movement snowballed, and Ike, as he was known, relented—his country needed him.

Now the press and historians tend to criticize his accomplishments, as they do all Republicans. But he was, in fact, a very good president. He left office with a 65% approval rating, even with the press against him. Now, as a comparison, former President Obama, with a fawning press at his side, left office with only a 51% approval rating. In my opinion, one of the reasons Ike was so effective is because he was reluctant to take the job. He did not lobby for it. He did not want it, but his country needed him. Contrast that with, let us say, Bill Clinton. He spent his whole life lobbying for the job. As far as I know, he never had a job outside of government and left office a multi-millionaire.

Now in the pantheon of presidents who rates higher, Eisenhower or Clinton? That is no contest. Humility trump's pride, no pun intended.

George Washington is another great example of a president who did not campaign for the job and he did not want the job, but he did a great job. Now, Abraham Lincoln definitely *wanted* to be president, I will give you that, but he also at times could be very humble. President Eisenhower told a story in a speech back in 1954 about Abraham Lincoln. It happened during the early days of the Civil War. Things were going very badly for the North. Quoting from this speech by President Eisenhower:

Once he [President Lincoln] called upon General McClellan. The president went over to the general's house [Eisenhower adds], a process which I assure you has been reversed since. And General McClellan decided he did not want to see the president, and he went to bed. Lincoln's friends criticized him severely for allowing a mere general to treat him that way. And he said, 'All I want out of General McClellan is a victory, and if to hold his horse will bring it, I will gladly hold his horse.'

Can you imagine a Bill Clinton, a Barack Obama, a Donald Trump with this kind of attitude?

Now, on the spiritual side, Moses might well lead the list of biblical leaders with humility that did not want to be leaders. God worked with him, however, had him herding sheep for 40 years, and instilled in him the

qualities he needed for the position God wanted him in. King David was also a shepherd. I was thinking maybe we should have a law. All politicians must first herd sheep.

Then there is King Saul. He started out well, but the power went to his head. You could be turning the I Samuel 15. We are not going to stay long here, but the prophet Samuel relays God's instructions to Saul. God wants the Amalekites punished per His promise in Exodus 17:14. You see, they were the first people to attack Israel after they left Egypt. The Israelites had no army, very few weapons. They were fresh out of slavery. They were stretched out over miles of desert and the Amalekites attacked them. God gave Israel a great victory and said, "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Though it is in I Samuel 15 where this promise is to be fulfilled.

I Samuel 15:2-3 Thus says the Lord of host: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

A hard task, to be sure.

I Samuel 15:9-10 He [Saul and the people] also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, . . . spared the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good.

Saul was given a direct order from God but he had become a politician. Notice it says Saul and the *people* spared Agag and the best of the lambs. He let the people have a say in the matter when he had already been given his marching orders by God Almighty! This was not a democracy where everyone votes on all the issues. This was a *theocracy*. A theocracy is a form of government which acknowledges God as the highest political authority, whether or not He is represented by human rulers such as a king. But Saul, insecure in his position, placated the people rather than obeying God. So Samuel the prophet comes to the scene of the battle. Saul launches into his spiel. He throws the people under the proverbial bus in verse 15 and then,

I Samuel 15:16-17 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Be quiet! [In effect, he says, "Shut up!"] Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night." And he [Saul] said to him, "Speak on." So Samuel said, "When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the Lord anoint you king over Israel?"

When Saul was humble, God made him king. Samuel then goes on to lay out what Saul did wrong but in verse 20 Saul, ever the politician, now says,

I Samuel 15:20-21 "But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. . .
But the people. . ."

He was already acting like a lawyer, painting himself as the victim. He did what God asked, at least in his mind. "But, you know, the people went off and did their own thing. I mean, really, Samuel, what could I do?"

Has this ever worked with God? Will this *ever* work with God? He is not some grandfather that got talked into buying candy for his little granddaughter. You imagine standing before God one day and He says, "Why didn't you obey My commandments? I opened your mind. I gave you My truth. What happened?" Do you say, "Well, you see, actually, I did. I did do what You said, you know, but my wife, my kids, my neighbors, um, see, they broke your laws, and well, every week, I had to pull ox out of the ditch, you know." That is not going to fly.

What I am trying to get across today is that if you are little in your own eyes, you can be used by God. We can grow, we can learn. We can eventually lead others. But if you are a politician, if you are seeking power or seeking position, if you are trying to gain an advantage over others, God cannot use you. And this applies whether you are a little fish in a small pond or a big shark in the ocean, whether you are in your neighborhood, your job, or your church. It is not just in the halls of government.

In the time I have left, I would like to delve a little deeper into the example of Absalom. You may remember Ted [Bowling] mentioned him briefly in a sermonette a few weeks ago, and this could be considered, I guess, a prequel to Ryan's [McClure] mention of Solomon. I want to briefly review a portion of Absalom's history, and I want to read the story to you from a modern

translation of the Bible. I think it reads like a Tom Clancy political thriller, and that is because Absalom was a very clever politician, and I do not mean that as a compliment. He absolutely wanted the throne, and he set out from an early age to achieve it. Problem was, he was not first in the line of succession. He was the third son, and he had to deal with that somehow. Amnon was first and then Kileab, and Kileab probably died young. There is no record of his life. Had he lived I doubt that he would have been a match for Absalom. But we know what happened with Amnon. I will get to that here in a second.

II Samuel 14:25 Now in all Israel, there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.

II Samuel 14:25 (CEV) [really succinct and to the point.] No one in all Israel was as handsome and well built as Absalom.

He even gets a verse in the Bible, the next verse actually, about his hair! He cut his flowing locks once a year, and they weighed the clippings. Some pretty heady stuff.

Back in 1980, a country singer/songwriter named Mac Davis wrote a tongue-in-cheek song called "It's Hard to be Humble." I am not going to sing it to you but I will read the first verse. It goes like this. "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror because I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me. I must be a heck of a man. Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doing the best that I can." I can imagine Absalom walking around singing something like this to himself, and it would be hard to be humble if no one in all Israel was as handsome and well built as you were.

But that was not enough. He had to have the power to go with this. I am sure you are all familiar with the story of how he removed his brother Amnon from the scene. Amnon had raped his sister, Tamar. That is found in II Samuel 13. Absalom bided his time, did not say much about it, and waited two full years to kill him. After murdering Amnon, he fled to his maternal grandfather, the king of Geshur (along around the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, about where present-day Golan Heights are), and stayed there three

years. After a time, David was consoled over the loss of his son Amnon and began to long for Absalom.

King David was definitely not in line for Father of the Year. He must have been tied up with affairs of state. He seems to have had little time for his children. I mean, his oldest son rapes his daughter and then he is killed by another son. What a family!

In II Samuel 13:39 he gets over Amnon's death, and he wants to see Absalom. So Joab, the captain of his army, hatches the plot to bring Absalom back to Israel. Joab was quite the politician himself, by the way. So Absalom comes back to Israel, but he is not allowed to see David for two full years. Absalom plays the long game, I can tell you. He waited two years plotting to kill Amnon, he spent three years in exile, back in Israel another two years before he could get in to see his father. In II Samuel 14:33 he is able to see David finally, and it seems all is forgiven.

So we come to chapter 15. I am going to read a large portion of this chapter, and I am going to read it from the *Contemporary English Version* of the Bible. I think it tells it better than I could tell it.

II Samuel 15:1-6 (CEV) Some time later, Absalom got himself a chariot with horses to pull it, and he had 50 men run in front. [I will interject right here that horses were something of a novelty in Israel at the time, and the chariot was not for speed. It was for show, to make a statement, an impression. Absalom knew the people would be awed by this.] He would get up early each morning and wait by the side of the road that led to the city gate. Anyone who had a complaint to bring to King David would have to go that way, and Absalom would ask each of them, "Where are you from?" If they said, "I'm from a tribe in the north," Absalom would say, "You deserve to win your case. It's too bad the king doesn't have anyone to hear complaints like yours. I wish someone would make me the judge around here! I would be fair to everyone." [Why do not people fall for this? And they still do today. There is nothing new under the sun.] Whenever anyone would come to Absalom and start bowing down, he would reach out and hug and kiss them. [The Me Too movement had not started at that time.] That's how he

treated everyone from Israel who brought a complaint to the king. Soon everyone in Israel liked Absalom better than they liked David.

Now let me interject here. King David ruled over a largely prosperous and peaceful kingdom at this time. But Absalom promised more. There is nothing new under the sun. People are captivated by flashing lights and glitz, or 50 men running in front of a fancy chariot. Many an evil man has come to power based on nothing more than good hair and a smile and the ability to speak well. I think of that Senator from North Carolina, John Edwards, that had the affair. He had good teeth and good hair, and voila! He is going to be president.

II Samuel 15:7 (CEV) Four years later, Absalom said to David, "Please, let me go to Hebron. I have to keep a promise that I made to the Lord. . ."

We will stop for a moment here. Some translations read 40 years passed instead of four. But that is incorrect. In my opinion there is sufficient evidence that four is the number here. But think of it, another four years of planning, maneuvering, politicking. If you add the time up, that is eleven years so far he has been playing the long game. How many years did Hillary Clinton wait? Or Joe Biden? That is what politicians do. They seem to just lay back in the weeds and they spin and they lie and they make promises and they wait for the right moment. And they have their supporters who become absolutely fanatical for them.

How does David not know what is going on here? He had to have known. He had his supporters too. Was he that secure in his position that he could afford to ignore this? Or perhaps David had become somewhat removed from the people, from their day-to-day lives. Maybe he had become too insulated in his ivory tower or too dependent on advisors who are telling him one thing and telling Absalom another.

II Samuel 15:8 (CEV) [Absalom tells his father] . . . when I was living with the Arameans in Geshur. I promised that if the Lord would bring me back to live in Jerusalem, I would worship him [offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving] in Hebron."

Why Hebron? Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown note that Absalom was born there and that it was a famous high place where sacrifices were frequently offered before the Temple was built. I think, really, it was just the best place to start the rebellion. Hebron is about 18 miles south of Jerusalem, and there he could meet up with his co-conspirators out of the king and his court.

In verse 9, David gives permission for Absalom to go and furthermore, he says in the NKJV, "Go in peace." In verse 11, he took 200 men from Jerusalem with him, but they had no idea what he was going to do. Absalom offered sacrifices in Hebron and sent someone to Giloh to tell David's adviser Ahithophel to come. More and more people were joining Absalom and supporting his plot. Meanwhile, Absalom had secretly sent some messengers to the northern tribes of Israel. The messengers told everyone, "When you hear the sound of the trumpets, you must shout, 'Absalom now rules as king in Hebron!'"

Two hundred men did not know what was going on and went with him? His posse, his entourage, his hangers on, did they think they were going to a party? I do not know how he got them there, but there was a lot of planning going on here for sure. And we see Ahithophel come onto the stage, perhaps the king's closest adviser. More of him in a moment.

II Samuel 15:13 (CEV) A messenger came and told David
"Everyone in Israel is on Absalom's side!"

Is this really the first David knows of this plot? Adam Clark, in his commentary, offers seven reasons how this has possibly come about. I will just read them to you without comment.

- 1) David was old or afflicted and could not well attend to the administration of justice in the land.
- 2) It does appear that the king did not attend to the affairs of state and that there were no properly appointed judges in the land. See, for instance, II Samuel 15:3.
- 3) Joab's power was overgrown. He was wicked and insolent, oppressive to the people, and David was afraid to execute the laws against him.

- 4) There were still some partisans of the house of Saul who thought the crown not fairly obtained by David.
- 5) David was under the displeasure of the Almighty for his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, and God let his enemies loose against him.
- 6) There were always troublesome and disaffected men in every state and under every government who can never rest and are ever hoping for something from a change. Boy, does that sound familiar?
- 7) Absalom appeared to be the real and was the undisputed heir to the throne. David could not, in the course of nature, live very long, and most people are more disposed to hail the beams of the rising than exult in those of the setting sun. No doubt some of these causes operated, and perhaps most of them exerted less or more influence in this most scandalous business.

II Samuel 15:14 (CEV) David's officials were in Jerusalem with him, and he told them, "Let's get out of here! We'll have to leave soon, or none of us will escape from Absalom. Hurry! If he moves fast, he could catch us while we're still here, then he will kill us and everyone else in the city."

David says to a staff, with an exclamation point, "Let's get out of here!" Remember, Hebron is only 18 miles away. Now I am sure David still had a core of support among the military. Think of all the times he had led them into battle. Absalom was, let us be honest, a pretty boy with no experience. I think with only a few men, David could have crushed this rebellion, but he did not. Too old, as Adam Clark said. He did not want to lose another son. Or as Adam Clark stated in his fifth reason, he figured this was punishment for his sins. Well, if that is the case, they were *his sins and his alone*. He could not force or compel others to go with him, just as we are not forced to follow God. He gives us free will.

So David and those close to him flee the city. The beginning of verse 23 says,

II Samuel 15:23 (CEV) The people of Jerusalem were crying and moaning as David and everyone with him passed by. [All Jerusalem wept!]

Absalom had worked his magic on the nation, evidently, outside of Jerusalem, out in flyover country, perhaps feeling that too many in Jerusalem owed their jobs to the king or were working for the government.

In the next six verses David decides to send the priests and the ark back to Jerusalem, which shows to me some humility and an acceptance of God's will, especially verse 26. In verse 31, David finds out that Ahithophel is one of Absalom conspirators, one of his *closest* friends. In the light of this treachery, you would think that David would pray for God to take vengeance on his former friend. But he does not. He prays that God would keep Ahithophel's plans from working, and God answers that prayer in chapter 17, verse 14. (Somewhere down the line in another message, I hope to go into Ahithophel in more detail because it is quite a story in itself.)

I do not really have time to go much further with this narrative about Absalom. I think we are pretty familiar with how it ends. Absalom and his supporters are defeated, and Absalom ends up with his hair caught in a tree, allowing Joab to put three spears in him while he hangs there. And then, to add insult to injury, another ten soldiers stand around Absalom's body, beating it. They then cut him down and throw them in a pit. What an ending for a man who would be king.

No one in all Israel was as handsome and well built as Absalom, but his good looks and a smooth tongue went to his head. He was able to manipulate those around him to bend to his will. Again, a good leader must be humble, but Absalom is the poster child for vanity.

Now, on the other hand, David, a man after God's own heart, oh, he sinned, sometimes spectacularly, but he *always* repented. And when he was humble, he was a great leader. When he thought more of himself than he should, everyone suffered.

So what does that mean for us? Well, I guess if we should find ourselves one day ruling as a king, these lessons might be helpful. But what about right now? Humility is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is called meekness in the King James. Moses had it in abundance. So did Abraham, and so did Isaac, and so did many others. A good leader is humble, and we all have opportunities to lead in our daily lives, if in nothing more than our examples.

What about *polis*, which morphed into politics? The activities associated with governing or the debate among individuals having or hoping to have power? Do we play politics in our own lives? Are we jockeying for position within our families, our jobs, our schools, or any other aspect of our lives? Do we belittle someone else to make ourselves look better? Do we criticize someone in a position above us, as in, "I could do better." The negative side of politics is all around us. Some of you might remember the Smothers Brothers. My brother Glenn and I just adored the Smothers Brothers. Tommy would always say to his younger brother, Dickie, "Mom always liked you best." and it was funny and it still is.

But that is family politics. Where are you in the pecking order? Do you suggest to your siblings, your parents, that another family member is inferior in some way? Same thing applies at work. Do you criticize co-workers to management or to your peer groups in hopes that you might achieve a higher position? At school do you belittle another student who maybe has issues or is not keeping up? These are all forms of politicking.

Ask yourself this. When Jesus lived as a man, was He a politician? Of course not. He obeyed His parents. He helped raise His siblings after Joseph died. He worked hard at His job. He probably turned His paycheck over to Mary, and initially in His life, when His brothers were skeptical of Him and told stories on Him to others, He ignored it. He just pushed on with what He knew He had to do. Do you think He could have been a better mayor of Nazareth than whoever was? Of course! Could He have run the country better than those appointed by the Romans? Well, absolutely! But see, this was not His job at that time. The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 4:11-13 to be content in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Christ did not lobby, did not politick for a higher position. Now, when Christ returns, it will be as Lord and King. He will rule with a rod of iron. He will

not stand on the balcony of the Temple and lick His finger to see which way the wind is blowing. There will not be any opinion polls. But even then, do you think He will be full of Himself with overweening pride? No. He will have to be firm in His dealings with the world coming out of the tribulation. But He will still be merciful and compassionate because that is His character. It will not be any different than it has always been.

Let us finish up in the book of James. I want to read James 4 and verse 11 but I am going to backtrack to verses 6-10.

James 4:11 Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

You see, this speaking ill of others would be practicing politics and it is wrong. Now I want to back up to verses 6-10, and I want to read those from the Amplified Bible.

James 4:6-10 But He gives us more and more grace (power of the Holy Spirit, to meet this evil tendency and all others fully). That is why He says, "God sets Himself against the proud and haughty, but He gives grace [continually] to the lowly (those who are humble enough to receive it). So be subject to God. Resist the devil [stand firm against him], and he will flee from you. Come close to God and He will come close to you. [Recognize that you are] sinners, get your soiled hands clean; [realize that you have been disloyal] wavering individuals with divided interests, and purify your hearts [of your spiritual adultery]. [As you draw near to God] be deeply penitent and grieve, even weep [over your disloyalty]. Let your laughter be turned to grief and your mirth to dejection and heartfelt shame [for your sins]. Humble yourselves [feeling very insignificant] in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you [He will lift you up and make your lives significant].

So be small in your own eyes. Do not practice politics. God will reward you accordingly.