

We Want to Be Like Everyone Else

I Samuel 8:1-22; Deuteronomy 17:14-20

By **[Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

Please be seated. Now tonight we come to the last in this current series of studies in I Samuel. We'll be picking it up again in the fall, in September. We'll be doing something else on Sunday evenings: a series on various people that Jesus encounters during the course of His ministry. These are Sunday evening sermons designed on the whole to be evangelistic in their import, and I would encourage you to begin to think of maybe a friend or a relative or a neighbor that you could invite along to one of these Sunday evening services. Several of the ministers here will be taking part in that series, running through June, July, and August.

But tonight we come to I Samuel 8, and this is a moment of transition. This is the point where Israel asks for a king. Samuel has reached an old age, and his two sons have been established as judges in the south of the land — but as we will see in a minute, the request that comes from the people is that they might have a king just like the nations around about them. But before we read I Samuel 8, it is important for us to catch something that Moses writes for us in the book of Deuteronomy. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 17, and from verse 14 through to the end of the chapter. This is the stipulation of God with respect to kingship in Israel: What kind of king must this king be, who would rule and reign over God's people? The point being, of course, that the request for a king is not in itself wrong, and it is something that God anticipates in the Pentateuch in the book of Deuteronomy.

Now before we read Deuteronomy 17 together, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord our God, we bow again this evening in the majesty and glory of who You are, thanking You that You have made yourself known to us not just in creation and providence, but You have made yourself known to us in Your word and in Jesus Christ. And tonight as we once again read the Scriptures, we thank You for a Bible. We thank You for a Bible that is infallible and inerrant, a Bible that is in every part exactly what You intended it to be. We pray tonight as we read the Scriptures that, by the strength and ministry and illumination of the Holy Spirit, we might once again read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for the sake of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, Deuteronomy 17, and we'll begin to read tonight at verse 14:

When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You shall never return that way again." And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Well, there are some important things in that passage, and I trust as we were reading that you were thinking how quickly things went sour in the kingship in Israel; and at least with the many wives, Solomon of course was to break that law and that statute immediately.

Turn with me now to I Samuel 8:

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He shall take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, "No! But there shall be a king over us that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles." And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey their voice and make them a king." Samuel then said to the men of Israel. "Go every man to his city."

Amen. May the Lord add His blessing to that reading of His holy and inerrant word.

When I'm asked why it is I believe the Bible to be the infallible, inerrant word of God, I answer that in many ways. But sometimes I answer that question by saying, "In the way that it tells the history of Israel, because it tells the history of Israel warts and all." There is absolutely no attempt here in the story of what is, after all, the foundation of the nation of Israel, to romanticize the story.

You may not believe me, but on my desk in my study at home is a volume by the renowned church and secular historian, Paul Johnson, *A History of the American Peoples*. It's over a thousand pages long, and a cracking good read! And it sits there to remind me of where I now am and whom I now serve, and my desire to learn more and more about the history of the American peoples. And it begins this way: "The creation of the United States is the greatest of all human adventures." [Now you have to understand, Paul Johnson is an Englishman telling the story of the history of the American peoples!] "The creation of the United States is the greatest of all human adventures. No other national story holds such tremendous lessons." In other words, this is going to be a wonderful tale about the creation of perhaps the most important nation in the world, as Paul Johnson is reflecting on the importance at least for the last 200 years of the

dominance of the United States in world history. And that, of course, despite some of the difficulties in the foundation of the United States, not least the dispossession of a native people and of course the whole issue of slavery.

Well, Samuel doesn't attempt here to tell a romantic tale about the beginning of Israel. Indeed, there's something about the way Samuel tells this story that brings shame and disrepute to himself and to his family, and particularly to his two sons.

Israel is in a state of transition. Up until now Israel has been a confederation of states. All of you here — well, most of you here — should empathize now with Israel as it was in contrast to Israel as it will become. Samuel was the first of the judges to rule and to exercise authority over what we might call all of the various tribal communities of this fledgling state of Israel. But from I Samuel 9 onwards, once Saul has been chosen to be king, Israel is in many respects a very different entity. It is a unified state. It is a federal entity with a central administration and all of the problems that arise from a central administration.

Our story begins here, and in the first nine verses we are given the gist of what this story is all about. It's a sad story. Samuel is now an old man. Presumably years of relative peace and perhaps relative prosperity have passed by. The ark of the covenant has come home and there is a measure of blessing, of the outpouring of God's blessing upon His people. God has been faithful to His covenant. God has kept His promises. Worship is being offered in the various centers...in Shiloh perhaps no more, but certainly in Ramah where Samuel had his headquarters. And as you see Samuel going round the various cities of the various states, tribal entities of this fledgling Israel, there's a measure of great blessing.

And then Samuel appoints his two sons. His two sons were called Joel and Abijah in verse 2. And immediately bells begin to ring in our minds — the story of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas in the opening chapters of I Samuel. And it's almost as though Samuel has pushed the “repeat” button, because it's a very similar tale. I don't know (as many of the commentators seem to know) that this was all entirely Samuel's fault that his sons turned out to be rascals. There's nothing in the text that tells us this was entirely Samuel's fault. It may well have been Samuel's fault, but the Bible doesn't actually tell us that, nor should we necessarily jump to that conclusion. Some of the godliest people I know have rascals for sons, and that's entirely in the disposition of the providence of God, and it just brings extra grief and unnecessary grief in every instance to castigate the parents for the sins of their children. And there's no evidence of that here. And I sort of wished as I was reading the eighteenth commentary who suggested that this was entirely Samuel's fault...I drew the conclusion this must be young commentators with children under three!

Samuel's sons are guilty of taking bribes. Well, there's nothing new under the sun, is there? I'm always amazed when I read the Bible just how modern and up

to date it is. You can't turn on the news, you can't read a newspaper or read news items on the internet or on your cell phone without stories of bribery and corruption, whether it's in this city of ours or whether it's in the state, or in this country, or somewhere in South America, or wherever. There's nothing new under the sun. And it is interesting to me that Samuel set his two sons in Beersheba. Now you remember the aphorism in Scripture, "from Dan to Beersheba." Dan is the furthestest north that you can get in Israel, and Beersheba is the furthestest south that you can get. Maybe Samuel had an inkling of what his sons might get up to, putting them as far south as possible. You might castigate Samuel for appointing his two sons if he had known beforehand that they would take bribes, but again, the Bible doesn't actually say that. And maybe there was no indication when he appointed his two sons in the most southern territory of the land and somewhat on the periphery of Israel...there may not have been any indication that his two sons would have been guilty of taking bribes at that point. And maybe this is partly the fault of old age, and perhaps not a little bit of nepotism.

Judges were not meant to be hereditary. Now the priests were meant to be hereditary, all of them having their lineage in Aaron, but there is nothing in Scripture to say that the judges were meant to be hereditary. You'll remember from the book of Judges — is it the eighth chapter? — the story of Gideon. And the people, you'll remember, loved Gideon so much that they asked Gideon to appoint his son and his future grandson as a judge. And remember Gideon's response: "No, the Lord will be a judge over you"... Gideon perhaps seeing the temptation in Israel to usurp the authority of God in what was always meant to be a theocracy, a nation governed by God, and the temptation in the peoples to usurp that authority of God and placing their allegiance and devotion, and placing all their hopes and dreams and aspirations in a man and in an individual. So that's where this story starts. It's a failure of the judges.

And the people come to Samuel — Samuel is about to expire. His two sons are rascals, so the people come to Samuel and they ask for a king. They ask for a king "just like the nations" all around them. It's a testing time. It's a testing time for Samuel. Samuel is an old man, but God still puts him through a testing time. Just because you are relatively old doesn't mean that God won't put you through another test. It's a testing time for the people of God. You'd think, wouldn't you...you'd think that they have learnt their lesson. You'd think that following the whole debacle with the ark of the covenant—putting all of their trust in the ark, in what was essentially a gold box, using it as a kind of talisman, using it as a kind of lucky charm in the midst of battle—you'd think that they had learnt their lesson when 34,000 of their own had been slain by God because of the error of their ways.

Well, a generation has passed, and whatever lesson had been learnt at that point has now altogether been forgotten. And the testing time is this. You notice in verse 20 there's a little hint as to what's coming: "...to fight our battles." Yes, on

this Memorial Day, there's always the rumor of war lurking on every page, as much in our time as it evidently was in Samuel's time. And what the people did not want to do was to trust God in their battles. "So appoint for us, then, a king."

Now I want to see two lessons in this first section (verses 1-9), and then I want us to see another lesson in the remaining verses (10-22).

I. We want to be like the other nations.

The first lesson revolves around this request. They ask for a king so that they might be governed just like the nations...just like the nations. What is that? Do you know what that is? That's worldliness, that's what that is. They looked to their neighbors. They looked to the surrounding nations and what they concluded was, 'If we are going to be successful, we must be like them.' Isn't that an astonishing thing? Isn't that something that we live by day after day after day?

I was reading this week...at the turn of the century in London there were errand boys who apparently as they went about their work were whistling. They were whistling tunes. But the tunes that they were whistling were out of tune just ever so slightly. And it wasn't just one errand boy, but all of the errand boys all seemed to be whistling out of tune. And some research was done and what they discovered was that the bells of Westminster were also slightly out of tune. And what these boys who lived and worked every single day within the sound of these bells had learned, they had picked it up from the environment in which they lived. They had learned to whistle out of tune.

We learn to whistle out of tune all the time. I was a child of the sixties, and I actually do remember —though it may surprise some of you, but I actually do remember "The Kinks." [*Laughter.*] But I actually do remember the song that I think they both wrote and sang: *I'm a Dedicated Follower of Fashion*. [Now everyone who's under 35 is looking completely blank, but the rest of you, I can detect you can remember just about that song!] *I'm a Dedicated Follower of Fashion*. It was an entirely horrid song, but it's an enormously important truth. We are dedicated followers of fashion, whether it's Britney Spears or Madonna. Ask our youth staff how much the fashions of the world around them affect the lifestyle of our young people. Oh, you parents know all about it! But all of us to some degree are dedicated followers of fashion.

Do you see what lies behind this? They didn't want to be different. They did not want to be different. They wanted a king just like the nations around them. We are called upon, dear people, to be holy. That means to be set apart. That means to be different, to be different from the world, to be different from all of those around us. The agenda that we follow is not the agenda of the world. The lifestyle that we follow is not the lifestyle of the world. We follow a different King, and we march to the beat of a different drummer.

II. In wanting a king, they are rejecting God.

But there's a second thing I want us to learn, and it's something more sinister. Because the thing that they ask first of all displeased Samuel, and we can certainly understand that Samuel took it personally. And it seems to be that when God says to Samuel, you remember, "It's not you they're rejecting, it's Me," that the Lord himself understood that Samuel may well have taken this personally as a kind of judgment on his own rule and administration in Israel. But God puts His finger on what the real trouble is. The real trouble for their worldliness was because they were actually rejecting God himself. They wanted to put their trust in someone else.

Now what is that? It is idolatry. It is idolatry. It is what Calvin writes in *The Institutes*, that man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols. Will you trust in the Lord, or will you put your faith in princes? And the people decided, 'We will put our trust in princes. We will put our trust in kings.' They were following, God says, an age-old pattern. And didn't your heart begin to rend just a little as we read verses 7, 8, and 9, when God almost, as it were, opens His heart to Samuel and says to Samuel, 'This is what these people have been doing ever since I brought them out of Egypt. Ever since I brought them out of Egypt I've blessed them. I've showered them with mercy after mercy after mercy, but they keep turning away from me. They keep putting their faith and trust in someone or something else rather than Me.' It's a pattern of idolatry. But if we're honest tonight we recognize it in our own hearts and in our own lives.

III. God gave them their request, and it turned them away from following God.

But there's a third lesson here, too. It's the lesson of Psalm 106:15: "He gave them their request, and He sent leanness into their soul." Be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it and regret it. Be careful what you ask for. Is it worldliness that you ask for? Do you want to be just like the people around you? Do you want to find your fun and your satisfaction and your pleasure and your wholeness in the things that other people find their fun and pleasure and wholeness in? And be very careful, my friend, because God just may grant you your request, and you will rue the day that you ever asked for it.

You have to smile a little in that section from verse 10 all the way down to verse 18 when Samuel gives it to them. 'Let me spell it out for you,' Samuel says, 'what it is that you're asking for. When you're asking for a king just like the nations around you, it's not the kind of king that is spoken of in Deuteronomy 17, a king that God chooses, a king that loves the Scriptures and writes the Scriptures in a book and meditates on that book day and night; a king that doesn't amass for

himself wives and gold and treasures and possessions. No, if you want a king just like the peoples around you, this is the kind of king that you will get.' And he describes big government, and he describes multi-layered bureaucracy, and multi-layered administration, and conscription into the civil service and into the armed forces, and an entourage of people to surround him, and easement of property and land, and confiscation of individual rights and privileges, and taxation, and taxation, and more taxation! It's death and taxes, is what they're asking for.

France, at the turn of the 18th-19th century, fell in love with Napoleon Bonaparte. They were in the midst of their revolution — a humanist revolution, an abandonment of their Christian past. Bonaparte had had some success, you remember, in Italy. He was the charming leader of the time, and he was appointed as a kind of commander in chief for a ten-year office. And it all went so horribly wrong, because they ended up with a leader who crowned himself a sovereign monarch of France and got France into all kinds of trouble, and into wars in Switzerland and beyond, and even brought the United States in the War of 1812...into what was a pointless war. They're asking for a king, and what they'll end up with is a Napoleon Bonaparte, someone who actually will take them back not just decades, but centuries into their past.

What kind of king? What kind of king should they have asked for? "Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation." The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, King Jesus...the King of which that text in Deuteronomy 17 was in fact a pointer to; a king of God's own choosing; a king who would love God's word. But what kind of king would he be?

Do you remember Pilate's question? "Are You the King of the Jews?" Do you remember Jesus' answer? "My kingdom is not of this world." Pilate couldn't understand it — a King who would lay aside his glory, veil his glory, be born in a stable in Bethlehem, of whom it would be said that the birds of the air have their nests and the foxes their holes, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head; a King who would lay down His life on behalf of sinners like you and me; a King who would bear our sins in His own body upon the tree; a King who would die the accursed death of a covenant breaker, and would leave this world with no possessions whatsoever; stripped of all His garments; hoisted from the ground onto a cross. And we worship Him, and we love Him, and we adore Him.

You see, there is one of two options tonight. We can say with those in the Gospels, 'We will not have this Man to reign over us,' or we can bow at Jesus' feet, at the King of God's own provision, and worship Him.

What you see in I Samuel 8 that will lead to the decision to elect Saul as the first king of Israel was a decision and a desire born in worldliness and idolatry, because the people wanted to be just like the people all around them. But to every Christian tonight, every believer tonight, our idea of a king is altogether

different, epitomized in the very person and the very face of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this period of history that warns us of issues that lie in our own hearts that we know all too well: a desire to mimic the world; a desire to be a dedicated follower of fashion... and it is a road that leads to ruination and damnation. Teach us, O Lord, more and more to bow at the feet of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and to say to our Lord Jesus Christ, "We are Yours entirely." Hear us; bless us; write this word upon our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).