

Calvin Speaks



Vol. 2, No. 3

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March, 1981

RULES FOR RULERS*

**Title not in the original.*

Sermon 106. 21 November 1555. Deuteronomy 17:16-20.

16. But he is not to multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to the end that he may multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, "You shall henceforth never return that way."

17. Neither is he to multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; nor shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

18. And it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, out of *that which is* before the priests the Levites.¹

19. 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, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them.

20. That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren,² and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand or to the left, in order that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.

We saw yesterday [Sermon 105] why God commanded kings to have a book of the law. For although they had been taught God's Word previously, yet when they ascended to power it behooved them to realize that they had more need than ever to rule themselves by God's Word, considering how hard a thing it is to govern a people. Moreover, God must be ready to work on their behalf, and men must acknowledge themselves far too weak for the task, so that they seek the help they need - namely, to be guided by God; and to get this help they must apply their study to

His Word. For it is in vain for us to hope that God will give us counsel, unless we seek it in His law. If a man says he is happy that God has given him His Spirit, and yet meanwhile despises all the appointed aids, such as the reading of the Holy Scripture and the hearing of sermons, does he not mock God? And so you can see that it is good and necessary for kings to have a book of the law.

There is a saying of a certain heathen man, which is taken for a common proverb, which says that the commonwealth is happy where wise men hold the helm, or where such as hold the helm give themselves to wisdom. This is a rare thing, yet men see that the saying is very true. For when men are chosen to govern a people, it is fitting that they should have intelligence and wisdom. It is not enough for a man to be of some courage and discretion before he takes the government upon himself, but he must also endeavor to profit continually when he has come to office, and to this endeavor he will be provoked by his experiences. Our true wisdom is to hearken to God when He speaks to us, and to obey His doctrine. So then we see how needful it was for kings to be exhorted to read God's Word most especially, and to give themselves thereto, not only to show themselves an example to others, but also for necessities'

¹ or, in the presence of the priests the Levites.

² that is, his countrymen.

sake because their duties are so great, greater than the capacities of any man.

The Magistrate Must Fear God

Now is it said expressly, *that they may learn to fear the Lord, without turning either to the right hand or to the left.* It is not enough for a king to have a book in his palace for fashion's sake. It does not matter if he puts on a good show, so that people say, "Look there! It is the law of God! God's Book is in the king's palace!" After all, we can see how the world is easily contented with mere ceremony. Indeed, the Jews, being perverters of all things, and so far possessed with the Devil that they have gone about to deface the substance and whole power of God's Word,³ whenever the king's book came into question among men they said things like, "It must be written on such and such a kind of parchment, and must have this and that done to it." Such things as these are worse than childish; and meanwhile they leave the chief thing alone. Let us mark then that God's intent was not to make a book that would become like a relic, to be showed as a mark of the king's dignity above all other men, but the reason for the book is set down here, that he should learn to fear God.

Now although this is spoken expressly concerning the kings of Israel (as was declared yesterday), yet it is a very sound teaching for those who are magistrates in these days (considering that their governing is in the name of our Lord Jesus). They should set their minds on the doctrine of salvation and endeavor to profit therein, aiming always at the mark which God has set before them — namely, to learn to fear Him — knowing well that unless they have the fear of God it is impossible for them to glorify him, and all things will after a while decline into chaos.

And by the way let us also note that the Holy Spirit here means to show us the use of Holy Scripture. For, as St. Paul says (2 Tim. 3:16,17), it is needed to make the man of God perfect in all good works. Therefore, whenever we read the Holy Scripture or hear it preached, let us take care to profit in the fear of God, and let us not think ourselves to be so advanced and mature that we do not need to keep making progress all our life long. Now, a man might think it strange that it is said the king must learn to fear God. After all, should the king be a mere novice when anointed? Should he not already have shown himself a man of excellent virtue? Of course. But we have to keep on being learners — the fear of God is not learned perfectly on the first day. Therefore, let us continue to study it through our whole life. For we shall find that no matter how long we live, in this matter we are still in the middle of our journey.

The thing, then, that we have to note in Moses' words is that when kings have the book of the law they are not to keep it shut or display it as a relic, but rather the king must exercise himself in it. His reading of it should not be as a mere pastime (so that he can say, "I have read in it,

and that's all I need to do"), but it should be for his advancement in grace. He served God in his youth, and should be quickened to do so now, knowing well that inasmuch as God now draws nearer to him, he is the more strictly bound to live a virtuous life. That is the very thing we are to take away with us from this text, and each of us apply it to his own use and circumstances, as I have said before.

Now is also said that *they incline neither to the right hand nor to the left.* This shows us that the fear of God is the true rule which, when thoroughly rooted in us, becomes a good and certain guiding star to us throughout all our life. Why is it that we gad about after our own likings and wander here and there, except that we have taken our eyes off God? Therefore we may conclude that those who turn aside either one way or another are showing by their lives that they are despisers of God. Are we willing to receive a good remedy to instruct us and to direct our life in such a way as we shall continually abide in the right way? If so, let us fear God.

This fearing of God presupposes a willingness and desire to obey Him. If a man alleges that he fears God, and yet all the while will not be taught by Him, does he not show that all is but hypocrisy, and an utter shamelessness in him? For example, you will see many in these days who pretend to be very devout, but they cannot abide to hear one word of admonition for their better instruction — it is enough, as far as they are concerned, that they make some fair show. But when Moses speaks here of swaying to the right hand or to the left, he presupposes this truth: that if we feared God we would be desirous to be taught by His will and to know what things He likes, that we might frame our lives thereafter. That is one more thing we have to keep in mind from this text.

The Magistrate must not be Warlike

Now let us come to that which is spoken here particularly concerning the kings of Israel. *They are forbidden to gather great numbers of horses to return again to Egypt.* Indeed, it will be said likewise later on that they must not multiply the number of their horses for covetousness' sake. But here is set down a special reason, which is that their covetousness might provoke them to go down into Egypt, either under pretense of avenging the wrongs and injuries that had been done unto them, or under any other

³ Calvin's remarks here does not reflect some primitive knee-jerk anti-semitism, but an accurate assessment of the hostility of the Jews to the Christian religion and to the Word of God. It would be well for Christians to keep this in mind, particularly given the increasingly severe persecution of Christian converts in the state of Israel today.

pretense. But our Lord's will was that although the children of Israel had indeed been mistreated and tyrannously dealt with, yet all the same they should acknowledge that they had been harbored in Egypt for a time. It is true that they were forbidden to have any familiarity with the Egyptians; His will was for them to be divided utterly from them, because He knew well that such [familiarity — ed.] would be their decay. Yet for all that, He would not have them making war upon them, but remaining quietly at home.

And now he says that the king must not multiply the number of his horses. For when a prince has the helm in his hand, he will take greater enterprises upon himself than a republic will take. Of course, sometimes in a republic there are some brainless persons who will set all things broiling. A prince, however, is always boldest, and that boldness is a cause of much confusion in the world. This then is the reason why it is said that the king shall not gather to himself a great number of horses to go into Egypt when he has made himself strong. For God had forbidden his people to go that way any more forever.⁴

Now from this we have to learn that when we have received any displeasure, if those causing it have done us any good in times past we must lay them both in the balance, and the good must outbalance the evil. Indeed, even if this commandment were not found here, it would still be unlawful for us to desire revenge. One reason alone ought to stay our hands and hold us back, namely that if we are beholden to some man and afterwards he does us some wrong, we should call to mind the good that we have received at his hand and it should bridle our lust for vengeance. This is what God had in mind when He forbade His people to practise any harm against the Egyptians.

But no matter what happened, He was opposed to their having any familiarity between themselves, and not without cause. For Egypt was a twisted nation, and Israel could have learned nothing but evil from mixing with them. Also, their idolatry was excessive, as far out of measure as could be. Therefore, it was good that the children of Israel should be utterly separated from Egypt, lest they become wrapped up in their superstitions. And we see how greatly the prophets insisted on this point (Is. 30:1; 31:3), though it availed nothing. Egypt became the place to which the people of Israel fled for refuge whenever they were troubled by other nations. When the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were at war, if the one had the help of the Assyrians, the other resorted to Egypt (2 Ki. 19:7; 17:4), and so were the causes of their own destructions. All this mischief came to pass because they did this against the prior warning of God, for God had warned them sufficiently beforehand.

Therefore let us bear in mind that when we see corruptions before us, we must not enter into them wilfully (unless we want to tempt God!). But when we see occasions of evil, how often do we shun them? Do we not rather run into them, and with great vigor? And therefore let us learn to abstain from all things that might seduce us to make us

overshoot ourselves.

Magistrates must not Enrich themselves through Taxation

The passage also states that *the kings shall not hoard up much gold and silver*. It is true that covetousness is forbidden to all men as the root of all mischief (1 Tim. 6:10). Once a man's heart is possessed with it, he will be snarled in all the snares of Satan. If a man is given to covetousness, he becomes cruel and uses all manner of outrage, violence, and cruelty. Soon he falls to plundering and has no conscience when he devours other men's substance. He falls into perjury, fraud, untrustworthiness, treachery, poisoning, and whatever evil he is enabled to perform as well. And when his malice is set on fire, he proceeds even to open murder. To be short, if a man allows himself to be won over to covetousness, he will become a very bondsman of Satan.

Why then does He single out kings here, forbidding them to gather up much gold and silver? Surely our Lord is not giving leave for private persons to enrich themselves while forbidding kings to do so! Rather the exact opposite. For if those who have better opportunity than we do are to be cleansed from that vice, what are we to be? For if any men should have the liberty to gather gold and silver, kings ought to have it the most. But God has forbidden it them, and so all other men had better look to themselves.

Moses speaks here of kings expressly as those who have the most need of remedy, because they have greater occasions of gathering than other men. For when a king reigns in a country that is rich and plentiful it is a temptation to him, insomuch that when he sees his subjects living at ease

⁴ This text (Deut. 17:16) is a little obscure in its word order. Calvin takes the same interpretive line in his *Commentaries* at this point; that is, that the king is not to multiply horses in order to mount a punitive raid against Egypt. Modern conservative expositors think the text more likely means that the king is not to sell his people to Egypt in exchange for horses. Egypt was one of the principal sources for horses in the ancient near east. As 1 Samuel 8 makes clear, the king would have a tendency to treat his people as slaves, and sell them into captivity in order to build up his machine. While Egypt might be the place the people were sold to, selling the people into bondage to any nation would also be forbidden by this text. "Going back to Egypt" becomes, in Scripture, equivalent to "going back into bondage" (cf., e.g., Deuteronomy 28:68; Hosea 9:3; 11:5).

Modern commentators also sometimes point out that, in the ancient world, horses were used only as weapons of aggressive warfare. Defensive warfare consisted in having strong walls and towers around a city. By forbidding the king to build up an army of horses, God was forbidding Israel to become an aggressor nation. Except for the conquest of Canaan, which was a special judgment of God, Israel was not allowed to be an aggressor.

Calvin's general point, of course, is sound, even if it is not the direct meaning of this passage in Deuteronomy.

he thinks to himself, "It will not hurt them to give me some tribute," and when he has raised one tax or tallage, there is never any end or measure of his gathering afterward. And so you see how kings have need of this restraint, because temptation is more present to them than to other men.

It is true that all men are tempted to gather goods and to enrich themselves, but since they do not all have the same opportunities to bring it to pass, this tends to cool their sinful ardor. A king, in contrast, has the means to draw wealth to himself continually and to enrich himself more and more, for he has the authority to levy taxes and tributes and by that means to lay up much for himself. It is therefore requisite that this evil be corrected in him.

And in this respect, David said, "Lord, reform my heart that it not be given to envy, and turn away mine eyes that they be not tangled, beguiled, and carried away at the sight of silver and gold" (Ps. 119:36, 37). Why does David speak in such a way? Because he had much more need than if he had been still living in the house of his father Jesse; there he would have been only a poor country peasant or shepherd, and he would have followed the common way of living. Once king, however, and having the riches of the whole land before his eyes so that no man could prevent his gathering as much as he wished, such opportunity was a provocation to his flesh and he might soon have overshot himself, as men commonly do. Therefore he bridles himself, saying, "Lord, restrain me." And indeed, if he had not been preserved miraculously by the goodness of God, he would soon have been corrupted at the sight of such opportunities. Thus, we now have the reason why Moses forbade the kings of Israel expressly to gather much gold and silver.

For, as I have mentioned before, when occasions of sin are offered to us, we must be bridled and held in when our flesh tempts us to anything; there is no other remedy. Although, then, this is spoken of kings, yet there is a lesson here for all men. Therefore, when we meet with any opportunity that may draw us into evil, let us see to it that we repress our lusts and make a shield and bulwark of this admonition lest we step aside to some vanity because we are overly frail.⁶ That is the thing whereof all of us in general ought to take warning when we see that the king was forbidden to gather much gold and silver when he reigned in a plentiful country.

Magistrates must not Practise Polygamy

Mention is also made here of wives, namely that *the king must not take many wives*. It is certain that this rule is common to all men. For although some of the patriarchs had many wives, yet it was not therefore lawful. To determine lawfulness we must consult God's institutions. It is true that man's custom may well permit this practice, but it cannot change evil to good for all that. It is God Who ordained marriage, and as He is the Author thereof, He will have all men hold to His pure institution.

Did He create two wives for Adam? No, even though (as the prophet Malachi says) He had an abundance of Spirit in Him.⁷ It would have been no harder for him to have created two or three than to have created one. Was God prevented by any inability? No, and yet He created two in one flesh. Since the matter stands this way, then, it is a changing of the order of nature and a despising of God when a man takes two wives. "Oh," they say, "but the patriarchs did so." Yes, but this only shows that the custom of men cannot nullify the ordinance of God, no matter how holy and virtuous the men may be in other matters.

This also shows that those who shield their sins under the shadow of other men's examples are guilty of double offense. For is it proper that God's authority should be diminished under pretense that men have done this or that? Therefore, let us understand that it was never lawful for any man living to have two wives in marriage at once, for it is a breaking of God's order.

Why then is it forbidden here only to kings? Because again kings have more liberty to transgress. The matter I touched on already is better confirmed to us in this text. If a private person had taken two wives, he would have been closely looked at. "What? Shall I give my daughter to a man that is married already? She would be sure to have much grief. She would live in continual strife and disquiet. She'd be better off dead." But men were so desirous of honor that if a king required a daughter of theirs as his wife, they easily gave in to it. "I shall have my daughter

⁶ Calvin is here arguing against seeking money for its own sake, hoarding it, and particularly using the power of the state to extract it forcibly from other people. There is nothing here against the development of productive capital. Indeed, Calvin's sound economic views set the stage for the prosperity of the Calvinistic nations of Europe and America. On Calvin's economic views, see Gary North, "The Economic Thought of Luther and Calvin," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 2:1 (Summer, 1975): 76-108.

⁷ Malachi 2:15, a difficult verse to translate. Calvin is taking it to read this way: "Did He not make one *flesh* even though He had a remnant of the Spirit? ... Take heed, then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth." The point, if we take the verse this way, is that God made one flesh out of two, even though He did not exhaust the reserves of His Holy Spirit in so doing, leaving energy left over for other labors. Similarly we, if we find we have excess of energy ("spirit"), ought not to take another wife, but find something else to do with it.

This is the interpretation Calvin places on Malachi 2:15 in his *Commentaries*.

married to a king!" And it was blinding to a woman to have a king press his suit upon her.

Now then, since kings had more opportunity in this matter, and consequently might more offend God, our Lord has specially forbidden them to have many wives. Additionally, He has forbidden it since the example of such as are in authority is more compelling than the example of private persons. If a common person do any evil, it goes no further than his own house and his next door neighbor's; but he that is in a place of authority stands on a platform and is seen from a distance, and if he overshoots himself, corruption spreads throughout the whole realm. Therefore, it was requisite that God should forbid kings to have many wives, because the corruption thereof would have spread over the whole land.

And although it could not be altogether prevented, it did come in first from the heathen. And if it is asked where the idea of having many wives came from, the answer is the house of Cain (Gen. 4:19), and not from among the people of God. This lewdness of having many wives was introduced by Satan. And the patriarchs were entangled in it; for it is hard for a man to keep himself from such a thing when once it has grown up into a custom, for then it seems to be permitted. All the same, so that it should no longer continue, and because there was occasion for it, our Lord forbade kings to have many wives.⁸

The Wives of David and Solomon

But here it might be demanded, "What about David, and much more Solomon, both as regards wives and as regards riches?" It cannot be denied that David had many wives; and as for Solomon, he had many more and he does not seem to have been blamed for this, for Scripture speaks only of the turning away of his heart after strange women who infected him with their superstitions and idolatries (1 Ki. 11:4).

And as touching gold and silver, we know that David gathered such a great amount of it that Solomon's Temple and his palace were built with it. Marvelous riches indeed! Indeed, it is expressly said that in the reign of Solomon, men took no more notice of gold and silver than of gravel, the quantity thereof being so exceedingly great (1 Ki. 10:27). So, there seems to be something of a contradiction in Scripture, inasmuch as our Lord says that He will cause the gold of Arabia and all the riches of the world to be brought to Jerusalem (Ps. 72:15); and why would He promise such a thing if He did not mean that kings should be rich and wealthy? (But, as we shall see, all this is a figure of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.) If this blessing of God is set down as so worthy a thing, how is it that kings are forbidden to gather gold and silver?

As for wives, no doubt both David and Solomon offended in that matter, and Solomon the most. As for David, he had many wives, and all the excuses that can be alleged

will not be able to justify him before God. But however the case stands, he did not do it through inordinate lust. For he had married Michal, Saul's daughter, and he could have contented himself with that one wife if she had not been taken away from him by force. And when she was given to another man, it was lawful for him to take Bathsheba. Again, other things happened afterwards, so that if a man considers why David took many wives, surely there will always be some occasion to excuse him before the world, but for all that, he was blameworthy still before God.⁹

As touching Solomon, he rebelled openly as a man too much given to the flesh, in that he proceeded even against the prohibition given both to himself and to all other kings. We can see what happened to him because of it. For in that he was so abused and deceived by alien wives, that was a just punishment; and because he had taken so much liberty to himself, God showed him that he had cast himself into Satan's snares. When a fish thinks to swallow

⁸ Since alliances between nations were sealed by marriage in the ancient world (and in the monarchies of Europe in the recent past), multiplying wives meant multiplying entangling alliances with Godless foreign (and enemy) powers. Calvin is right in all that he says, but the main point seems to be to prevent such alliances. Israel was to trust in the Lord alone for her security, not place her reliance on treaties of detente with Egypt, Assyria, or some other power. Christians today are tempted to enter into "mutual non-aggression pacts" with the humanists in our nations. Security is seen in our constitutions, which guarantee "religious liberty" to all parties. In the hands of the humanists, however, such "guarantees" are rapidly becoming a farce. Christians need to realize that their security is always in Christ, and that they are never to leave off aggressive warfare against the Canaanites of this age.

Alliances among genuinely Christian nations, of course, are proper, as is seen from Joshua 22, as interpreted by the Reformers.

⁹ This paragraph on David's wives is a bit confusing as it stands in the original English translation. I take it that Calvin means David was guilty of sin and of the sin of lust, but not in the same inordinate degree as was his son Solomon. The 1583 English translation goes on to say that once Michal was taken from him, it was all right for David to marry "Bersabee," which I take to be Bathsheba. Actually, David's second wife seems to have been Ahinoam, or perhaps Abigail (1 Sam. 25:42-44).

The reader should keep in mind that these sermons were not written by Calvin, but were written up from notes taken in shorthand. It may be that phrases were unwittingly omitted, or that the earlier English translation does not do full justice to the original French. It is also possible that Calvin made occasional slips of the tongue, which were not corrected.

up other fishes, he himself is caught or choked by the same means. Even so Solomon deserved to receive his payment, because he gave himself too much to his delights and pleasures.

It is a dreadful thing and a matter that ought to make the hair stand up on our heads, that so excellent a man, endowed with such great gifts of God's Spirit, should become an idolater and fall away from the pure service of God; especially since he was himself a prophet who was to teach the whole world and a lamp to direct not only the children of Israel but also the very infidels, and to draw them to the knowledge of the truth. How monstrous that such a man should overshoot himself after that fashion! And where did this come from? From giving way to his own lusts, and therefore God paid him his just wages. Seeing we know this, ought we not to quake at such vengeance set before our eyes? Yes, and therefore let us mark well that whereas David and Solomon had many wives, it was not without fault and transgression.

From this we see so much the more how needful this law is. For if God have never forbidden kings to have many wives, would not their liberty have been even more excessive? Yes, indeed. They cannot be withheld from rebelling against God. Their flesh carries them away so that they forget that which ought to have been best known to them. This text ought be noted above all others, especially for kings; and yet they pay no heed to it at all. And so we see it was not for nothing that God dealt with this mischief.

We must understand along with this that is it not enough for the law to be set down, unless God writes it on our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Otherwise it is a dead letter, and will kill us because we shall be justly condemned by the doctrine of it, which serves to render us without excuse. Therefore, whenever our Lord commands us anything, let us learn that we must run to Him, that He may write on our hearts what we read in His Book.

The Riches of David and Solomon

As touching riches, we must not conclude that there was a like fault. Why? Because when David gathered such a mass of gold and silver, it was to build the Temple of God, and not to make any other enterprises, as we know (2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Chron. 22:14). Again, we do not find that he grieved his people, though there were great complaints after the death of Solomon (1 Ki. 12:4) — we shall turn to that in just a moment. David's intent, then, was good and holy, since in gathering all the things together that were required for the building of the Temple he did not attempt anything not commanded him by God. Also, the means were lawful, for he did not lay any tyrannical yoke upon his people.

As for Solomon, he had the great riches gathered before-

hand by his father. And again we must note that a great part of those things were such as he had conquered from the infidels (Ps 68:12, 13), and these spoils were, you might say, presents which God had given him, as the psalm says. And therefore Solomon for his part might lawfully use all those goods, especially since it was said that the kings of Tarshish and of all the Isles and distant lands would come and bring gold and silver and all manner of precious things, and again, that there should be given him the gold of Arabia (Ps. 72:10), since it was God's will that the kingdom of Israel should flourish after that manner. It was lawful for David and Solomon to gather treasure as long as it was not for ambition or pride, nor to undertake foolish enterprises and to overshoot themselves into looseness of life; and also as long as the people were not grieved by it with any impositions, but that David only received the gold and silver that was brought to him.

Whether Solomon exceeded measure or not, I am not able to say. We see what his disobedient son Rehoboam said, namely, that whereas his father had beaten the people with rods, he would beat them with whips, and he would lay upon them as much as they could bear until he made all their backs to bow (1 Ki. 12:14). In this speech, Rehoboam glories in his father's tyranny, and we may well gather from this that there was some excess in Solomon.

So much the more ought we to note, then, that God has not for nothing forbidden kings to gather great masses of gold and silver. And for the same reason did David also use the prayer which I have rehearsed before, for there was good reason for him to pray this way. He saw the temptations that might assail him on all sides, and he could never have withstood them if God had not strengthened him with His power. And in the same vein he protests that God's law is dearer to him than gold and silver and that all riches of the world were nothing to him in comparison with God's law (Ps. 19:11), because he saw there his true felicity and glory.

So then, let us remember in a few words that whereas our Lord forbade kings to hoard up great treasures, it was not because it is not lawful for them to be rich, but so that their hearts not incline to pride, vainglory, and envy, and that they use no tyranny over their subjects but only take that which is offered them as it were by the hand of God and content themselves therewith, applying the same to good.

We can see what happened to king Hezekiah. Even though he did not have a third part of David's income because of the separation of the kingdom of Israel, yet he had his chambers so well furnished and stored that he made a show of them and boasted about them when ambassadors were sent to him from Babylon, commending himself and putting himself forward so that the king of the Chaldeans would be desirous of his friendship. We see what happened

to him: The prophet Isaiah brought him this message, "You have made a show this day of your gold and silver and of the precious things you have, but be assured that you have kindled a fire which will never be quenched until the Babylonians have carried off all that you have, so that there will not remain one piece of money in Jerusalem, but all will be sacked and pillaged away" (Is. 39:2, 6); and we see how this punishment came to pass later on (2 Ki. 24:13).

This example shows us sufficiently why God forbade kings to gather much gold and silver. For when princes have such treasure, they can hardly keep themselves from being provoked to glory and exalt themselves continually after some manner or other. Since this is so, let us learn that in this place God meant to hold the kings of Israel within some measure and in a lower degree, that they might not appear too high.

Magistrates must not Exalt themselves over the People

Afterwards he says *that his heart not turn away*; that is to say, lest his greatness make him forget himself. And he adds further, *that he not exalt himself above his brethren*. The reason why it is said that the king must not turn away is that when men are advanced to honor they commonly forget themselves and think that they are no longer the same as they were before. Above everything else, the dignity of a king is an estate that will blear a man's eyes. Indeed, it will completely put them out! so that princes think that they are not mortal creatures but regard themselves as half-gods by reason of their high advancement. We see them acting as if nothing were impossible for them, so that they will not be subject anymore to right or reason. And if men do not flatter them and honor them as gods, they think they have received the greatest of wrongs. And why does this come to pass? For this reason, that when a man is great he can have neither mildness or lowliness in him unless God's Spirit reigns in him.

For this reason kings are here warned to beware that they do not forget themselves. Indeed, the point is even better expressed when Moses adds, *that they might not exalt themselves above their brethren*. Why is it that kings and princes have to set their feet upon all men's throats after that fashion? Because of this pride which poisons their hearts, so that they consider themselves not to be men, nor remember any longer what their actual estate is. And when they are so blind with respect to God, we are not surprised when the fulness of their pride and presumption makes them tread men under foot and see to it that all men stand in awe of them and stoop to their yoke. That is why Moses matches these two things together.

Now then, if we intend to refrain from doing wrong or outrage to any man, let us see to it that we know ourselves. For (as is said in the common proverb) he that knows himself best sets least store by himself. It is God's way that we behave ourselves in a lowly and meek manner toward our

neighbors. If however, a man forgets himself, he will eventually mount up into all kinds of pride and outrage, without sparing anything. Seeing that this was forbidden to kings, what is the rule for such as are by far their inferiors? Therefore let every man in his degree apply this matter to his own instruction. Let such as are in authority well beware that they not exalt themselves through pride, if they do not want to be cast down to their shame. For the higher the seat is on which a man sits, the sorer is his fall, perhaps even to the breaking of his neck. Therefore, let those whom God has exalted have a care to hold themselves continually in place and not stir aside but serve God and His people continually.

And it is expressly said here, *against your brethren, or above your brethren*; for kings and princes think themselves to be as it were cut off from the ordinary company of men, so that they ought no longer to be counted among the common array. Our Lord, in contrast, scorns such disdainfulness, saying, "They are still your brothers." Of course, this is spoken concerning the children of Abraham, which were all descended from one line; but choose any king you wish, and I ask you: is he not a man? And are not the people over which he rules his brothers? And if this is the case with the greatest kings of the earth, how much more obviously is it true for those which are manifestly their inferiors?

Now therefore, when a man is in authority or has the means to maintain himself in the esteem of others, if he is tempted to forget himself let him reason with himself in this way: "I have not been separated from the rest of the body, but am a member of it still. They who are my inferiors are still my brothers also, what a thing it would be, then, if I glorify myself? Would it not be a despising of God Himself?" Let such as are advanced to any condition of great preeminence remember this warning as often as they are tempted to despise other men and to shake them off. Let them think thus: "What? Should we be as lions toward lambs when there is brotherhood; There is no brotherhood between a lion and a lamb. If I have a lion's heart, full of pride, lordliness, and overweening, what kind of a thing is that? Will I be able to live with the flock committed unto me?"

Indeed, we see what is said concerning king Hezekiah, when the prophet Isaiah tells him of the restoration of the people to their former estate. And no doubt he had an eye on this text, to show how it was the duty of Hezekiah and of all kings to be a shadow for the refreshing and easing of their people, a foster father to the poor and fatherless, and a comfort to them that are in distress and sorrow (Is. 49:23). And as a conclusion he says that the fear of God will be a treasure in his time (Is. 33:6), according to that which I have shown already. So, if kings wish to behave

themselves as they ought, they must set their minds on this lesson, as found in the word of God. It was applied to the person of Hezekiah, but all other men must apply it to themselves as well.

And if our Lord tells this lesson to those that are great, without sparing them, no matter what temptations they face; what will come of it if inferiors insist on playing the loose colt and will not be bridled but kick against God and spurn Him? Do they not also show themselves to be very much blinded by pride? Therefore, let us learn so to profit by our Lord's teaching that all men both great and small may submit themselves, every one according to his degree, estate, and calling; that God may be honored by all men, and that there may be one general obedience from the highest to the lowest.

Prayer

Now let us kneel down in the presence of our good God with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him to make us feel them better than we have, so that by such means we may be drawn to true repentance, hating all our vices and transgressions and ridding ourselves of them, until God has so wrought in us that we are thoroughly clothed with His righteousness. Let us pray Him that during the interim He would bear with us in our weakness, so that we might not fail to obtain favor at His hand, even though we do not live in such a state of perfection as we wish. Let us pray Him to grant this grace not only to us but also to all the people and nations of the earth, bringing back all poor and ignorant people out of the captivity of errors and darkness in which they are held, that thus He might lead them to the knowledge of His truth, and that for this purpose it would please Him to raise up true and faithful ministers of His Word...

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James B. Jordan
Editor

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