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## *Vagabond: Cutting Corners* 1 Samuel 24

Do you remember Humphrey Bogart's line in Casablanca? "Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine." I wonder if he stole that line from David in this story? "Of all the caves, in all of En Gedi, in all of the Judean Desert, Saul walks into mine!" En Gedi sits on the Dead Sea. As you drive along the western shore on the way to Masada, turn and look to the right and **everywhere you look** you will see a cave. And of course, thousands of other places you cannot see without tromping around in the desert. It is near here that the famous Dead Sea scrolls were discovered ...in a cave.

David was on the run. He wasn't alone any more as we learned last week. He was now the leader of a motley crew that had attached themselves to him at the cave of Adullam. And paranoid Saul was **still** obsessed with finding and killing David. The only thing that interrupted this obsession was when he had to deal with Israel's arch-enemies, the Philistines. This morning, in the middle of Saul's hunt for David, nature calls. King Saul has to go potty. ...and so, he finds a nice quiet cave for his morning constitutional.

So...what are the odds that Saul would pick the one cave in all of the Judean desert where David and his band are hiding out? Not very good...unless, of course, God orchestrated this awkward reunion. Saul walks in. He's blinded by the change of light. But David and the boys, hunkered down in the back of the cave, see his profile, know exactly who he is and exactly what he is about to do. **And the men cannot believe their good fortune.** They are convinced that this is the hand of God delivering this awful king into their clutches...and delivering Saul's crown into David's hands where it belongs. Can you hear the whispers? "David...this is it! This is your moment! Saul is vulnerable... wow, is he vulnerable! Take him out! Take that big sword of yours and finish him off. One stroke, we are done running for our lives and you have the throne that Samuel anointed you to. Do it! **Kill him! Kill this terrible man!**"

David listens to their counsel...and then...creeps up to Saul as he crouches there. The Hebrew says literally that David "cut off the skirt" of Saul's robe. What makes this fascinating...and a little icky...is that this phrase in Hebrew is a euphemism...a play on words. To "cut off a man's skirt" meant to cut off his genitals. And the

thought **probably** crossed David's mind. That...and worse. One quick whack and Saul is done for! And his awful legacy is done for. And David's future is secure. But David can't do it. He can't. Instead, he **literally** cuts off the skirt...cuts off the corner of Saul's robe. **Now, how he managed to pull that off without getting caught is pretty amazing...and pretty hilarious to imagine.** But he did it...and he sneaks away with the trophy. Now, let's listen to the rest of the story: *[Read verses 5-22]*

Saul finishes his business, stands up, adjusts his robes... and walks out. Little does he know that David is in the back of the cave ordering his men to stand down. They taste blood in the water and can't believe that David has let this opportunity slip through his fingers. But David orders them: **leave the king alone!** Little does Saul know how close that trip to the toilet came to being his last!

Then... David walks out of the cave and calls to Saul. **"My lord the king!"** Saul wheels around. And this is what David does... bows down. If Saul had been at his mercy moments earlier, now David is even more at the mercy of an unfaithful man. David begs Saul to see reality. "My lord, you are taking bad advice. You are listening to lies. People are telling you that I am trying to harm you; it is not true! I am loyal. I am faithful. I would never lift my hand against the Lord's anointed. **And here's the proof!"** David waves the corner of Saul's robe in front of his eyes. Do you hear what he called Saul? "My father!" Do you hear the tenderness? "My father...I could have killed you. But I did not! I am guilty of no wrongdoing; no rebellion. God knows this is true. I am nothing for you to worry about! I am a dead dog. I am flea! And yet you are bent on killing me. **'May the Lord be our judge and decide between us! May he consider my cause and uphold it; may he vindicate me by delivering me from your hand.'**"

What a speech! And did you notice Saul's response? "Is that **your** voice, David **my son?**" The voice I have known so well? The voice that offered to fight Goliath when no one else would? The voice that comforted me with songs in my times of depression? The voice that counseled me? The voice that spoke words of love to my daughter and words of friendship to my son? Is it that the voice I am hearing?" And the painful irony of that moment crashes over the top of Saul. What does he do? He weeps! No crocodile tears. He convulses with remorse before David. And then...when he has composed himself... he makes his own speech. "You are a better man than I am, David. You have treated me well; I have tried to kill you. I see now that God is with you and protecting you."

And then, these remarkable words: **"I know that you will surely be king!"** Wow. The first time Saul has ever said those words. "I know that you will surely be king!" He goes on. "And since I know you will be king, promise me you won't wipe out my family." That's what they did in those days, you know. In fact, in parts of the ancient Middle East, when a man was crowned king, he usually had all of his own brothers executed...strangled in a chair because it was against the law to spill royal blood. That was one way to avoid a palace coup; wipe out your competition.

Saul begs David not to do this. And David promises. And then they go their separate ways.

We read this passionate exchange and say, "Wow, what a wonderful end to the story. David is merciful. Saul is sorry. They shake hands and leave as friends. The end." Right? Not quite. **Two chapters later**...virtually the same thing occurs. Saul repents of his repentance. He's chasing David again. Trying to kill him, again. And during the night, David sneaks into Saul's camp and steals his spear ...you remember that spear, right? The spear that Saul kept trying to use to turn David into shish kebab? David steals that spear, sneaks across the valley to the hill on the other side...and calls out to Saul. Again! He holds up Saul's spear, mocks his bodyguards and repeats himself. "I could have killed you. **Again!** Look...here's the proof. Your spear from right beside your bed. But I didn't do it. **Again!** Because I am your loyal servant. So, please Saul, back off! Stop trying to kill me."

And, again, Saul repents. Again, Saul is sorry. Again, Saul blesses David, promises to be a good boy...and goes home. Again. **But David never believes Saul.** He never feels safe. And despite Saul's words about David being the real king, until Saul dies by his own hand, David remains on the run. A vagabond-king for twenty years!

There are two fascinating parts to these stories. First, Saul. Troubled, twisted Saul. Have you ever known someone who did bad stuff...said he was sorry...went out and did the same bad stuff again...said he was sorry...again...and on and on and on? The husband who strikes his wife, apologizes tearfully, but does it again and ...again. The woman who promises to stop drinking...and keeps drinking herself right into destruction. The child who promises to stop lying to her parents...but keeps right on lying. The dad who promises not to work so much...promises to make time for his wife and kids ...and keeps right on working. The guy who promises God that he will stop looking at porn...and keeps looking. Apologize. Sin. Apologize. Sin. Apologize. Sin. Apologize....

Sin and sorrow. Relapse, remorse, relapse, remorse. That was Saul. If you love someone who is stuck in a **Saul-cycle**, sooner or later, you reach a broken-hearted point where you **don't believe them anymore.** You don't believe they will ever stop; that they will ever be better. Even if they promise to. I don't know what was going on with Saul. I think he was mentally ill. The Bible says that God took HIS Spirit away from him...and sent an evil spirit upon him. That is a very troubling passage but the clear teaching is this: Saul reached a point of supreme, habitual wickedness where the Lord finally said, "Fine... you want to be that kind of person. I will let you be that kind of person. In fact, I will confirm it in you!"

This is a hard word and a stark warning. If you are here this morning, locked in a cycle of sin and sorry, sin and sorry, sin and sorry...**sooner or later, you will stop being sorry.** Sooner or later, you will just be locked into your sin. The time to break free from it is now. The time to seek the counsel of others who can help you

experience Christ's transforming power is now...right now...before your break your promise one too many times **and the Lord confirms you in your sin!** But the centerpiece of this story is obviously David. And I want to return to one verse. Did you notice the description of David in the cave after he cut off the corner of Saul's robe? Verse 5: **"Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe."** Really? Conscience-stricken? Over a piece of cloth? Maybe David is just a wee bit too sensitive? Was he really that concerned about messing up the royal wardrobe?

Of course not! **Why was David conscience-stricken?** I wonder if ... in that moment...David considered doing what his men had urged him to do. Cut off more than a piece of cloth! **I think it was a great temptation to David to finish Saul off.** To be done with this reprehensible man and get on with his reign as king. I think David was tempted to really cut corners... not the corner of a robe... **but to cut the corner on his journey to the throne.** To speed things along. To be done with the wandering and the running and the fear. To help God along in what he had already said he wanted to do: make David king. You can't be king if there is already a king. **Kill Saul. Problem solved. Corner cut!**

When David cut the corner of the robe, it was a sign that he refused to cut the corners that mattered. He was not going to hustle God along...hustle the process along...even to get what he knew was right. **It might have been right...but it wasn't ripe!** God wasn't ready, yet, to give David his crown. God would get to it in his own sweet time. And despite the urging of his men to hurry it up by killing Saul--when he had the chance--**David refused to cut that corner.**

There are a lot of things about David that are disturbing in these stories...lies, doubt, fear... but one of the places he shines through is right here: he will not, will not, will not lift his hand against the Lord's anointed. He will not kill Saul so that he can hurry up what he believes even God wants to get done. If God wants to make him king, God will have to deal with the king who presently occupies the throne. Because David isn't going to do it.

No cutting corners! This is such a powerful image and such an important message to us today. It is SO tempting to cut corners to get what we want. Fudge this paperwork, exaggerate that accomplishment, undercut a competitor, badmouth an office mate, manipulate a less clever friend or spouse. **And what makes it an even greater temptation is when we believe that what we are pursuing is right!** Or even, God's will! When we are sure that the end justifies the means because the end is righteous.

How many saw my e-bulletin two weeks ago in which I described the letter that I and six of my large-church colleagues sent to our denomination. We call ourselves the Seven Dwarfs. It has created quite a stir. You can find it on our web site. Essentially it says that we believe our denomination is in an irreversible decline. There are some bright spots and many great churches, but our structure...our

theology...our sense of common mission...is in a fragile and decaying state. We propose to look at radical new ways of being the church going forward and we want the freedom to explore these ideas without the rancor and badmouthing that so often characterizes church-wide conversations.

The response to this letter from across the nation has been surprisingly passionate. Some are encouraged. Many are angry. But we are committed to ignoring angry attacks and moving forward to what we pray will be a better future. This isn't mostly about Chapel Hill or the other large churches. We have the resources to carry on. This is also about the larger body of Christ...the small evangelical churches who are frightened, struggling and trying to figure out a way forward, and all the congregations of this denomination who need to matter for Christ in the communities they are called to serve. So, it is an exciting, stimulating, frightening time to be Presbyterians.

But here's the deal! We cannot cut corners. Whatever God's purpose is for this church and the larger church going forward, we cannot try to hustle it along to fit our timetable. We have to trust God's timing, listen for his voice, follow his lead and be patient...however we might want to leap out ahead of Him. That is what your elders are doing...and I would beg your prayers for all of us as we try to lead courageously, graciously and humbly.

So...how about you? Can you think of one area in your life where you are tempted to cut corners? To speed things along? Maybe to cheat or fib or fudge a little bit to get what you want? To get what might even be good? Are you cutting corners in your marriage? Your wife doesn't love you any more. Another woman does. Obviously, you made a mistake the first time but this time...it will be better and right. Out with the old, in with the new. Right? **Clip, clip!** You are desperate to turn your business around. Surely, God wants you to flourish! A little fudging on the tax return and suddenly, you have the margin you need, right? **Clip, clip!** You love your boyfriend. That's what counts! A little sex will just make you that much closer, right? **Clip, clip.**

You know, this story isn't mostly about Saul. It's not about whether he was an evil jerk who deserved killing. He did. This story is about David. Who is he? Who will he be? That's the question about you, too. It's not about your wife or your boss or the bully at school or your crummy teacher. Not about whether they are jerks. They might be jerks. It's about whether you will be a jerk. It's about you; about your nobility. **About your anointing!** Will you do what is right...what Christ calls you to do...**or will you cut corners?**

Take a look at your bulletin. You've got a corner that you can cut. I want to take a moment of silence and write down the area of your life where you are tempted to cut corners. Marriage, class work, parenting, tithing. Do it now. Now...rip it off. I wonder what David did with the corner of Saul's robe. I'll bet he kept it for the rest of his life...as a reminder that he was not going to cut corners to get to what God

wanted. How about slipping this into your pocket or purse or Bible... Keep it as a reminder that you aren't going to cut corners, either.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Read the passage out loud.**

**Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church: write down some applications.

**Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

**Pray together:** tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

### **Dig deeper**

1. What was the counsel of David's advisors? How did he respond to their advice?
2. How is it possible to rise above bad advice from good friends? Can you remember such a time in your life?
3. Explain Saul's repentance, especially in light of chapter 26. What do you think happens to the "habitual" repenter who keeps returning to his/her sin?
4. Why wouldn't David "cut the corner" of slaying Saul and claiming his throne? Wasn't he the newly anointed king? What corner cutting do you regret in your own life?