



Mixed Motives

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1st Kings 2:41-3:9

Fairy tales, Hollywood, and comic books tend to separate people into neat categories of good and evil. We are used to that way of categorizing people. It makes it difficult for us to make more accurate assessments of others and even of ourselves. Light and dark, black and white, good and evil is the way we want to distinguish people, make decisions, and categorize people, systems, and things according to worth or value. Deep down, we know better. It often takes more effort to deal with these deeper definitions than we are willing to give, however. We want the quick answers. We want the simple definitions. We want definitive categories. Truth and reality are far more complicated.

We generally make decisions based on a mix of motives. Some of those motives are good. Some are less so. Some are completely inappropriate, bad, or wrong. We are not so simple in orientation that we have all good or all evil intentions behind our actions. Our motives are mixed. The values of our actions and decisions are mixed. We live life in shades of gray, though we want to speak of it as black and white.

A jury in Florida returned a verdict of not-guilty this week. Some are rejoicing in a verdict of innocence. Some are distressed at a miscarriage of justice that allows a youth to be killed and the shooter to go free. Some have viewed the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case as an issue of prejudice against the African-American community. Others have looked at the case from a position of the right to bear arms or the right to use them in self-defense. Others have looked at the issue of a civilian taking advantage of laws that allowed him to take initiatives in carrying out justice beyond the limitations of legal sanction. That array of motives looking down on the case should tell us something. We are not looking at the case from the same perspective. Neither should we attempt to boil down the issues to one single strand of perspective and motivation. The case is more complicated than that. We are more complicated than that.

At the end of the day, a youth was killed. A neighborhood watch volunteer pulled a trigger. The African-American community has been the brunt of much injustice. There are tensions between Latino and African-American communities. There are concerns with the prevalence of firearms. There are concerns with restraints being placed on rights to self-defense. Sections of the community are feeling threatened by the growth of minority communities. There are laws in Florida which allow for citizens to use deadly force in cases of self-defense. There is justice. There is miscarriage of justice. We are all impacted in different ways by the same events, depending on how they apply to our own situation, our own priorities, our own issues, our own sense of security and right and wrong. Neither Trayvon Martin nor George Zimmerman demonstrated stellar credentials of exemplary character, nor of unredeemably despicable character. They lived lives too much like us, with mixed qualities of character, decision, action, and motive.

That is precisely the kind of story we find here in 2nd Kings, as well. We do not want to find our Biblical characters hard to define in categories of good and evil, yet that is precisely what we do find, over and over again. We want the Bible to portray for us larger than life character examples, both good and evil, to show us how to live in neat categories. The Bible would rather portray for us examples of real life, of people as they truly are, a mix of good, bad, indifferent, and confused. We find not the characters of fables and fairy tales, but real people just as mixed up as we ourselves tend to be.

Solomon begins his reign in a quest to consolidate his political power. He carries out his father David's wishes in regard to certain individuals, fulfilling both the good and bad of his father's directions. He takes justice into his own hands, he treats others with compassion, and he steps beyond the limits of God's direction by taking foreign women for the political gain in establishing peace treaties through marriage. Chapter three takes us almost as an afterthought of Solomon's initiatives.

Afterthought, because Solomon has first taken matters into his own hands to silence the political opposition to his reign and to use the strategies of the nations around to secure his position with marriage to the world power, Egypt. It is then that Solomon turns to God.

Solomon goes to the approved center of Yahweh worship with thousands of offerings for God, as if to purchase God's good will and blessing. He has first done all humanly possible to chart and protect his course, now he turns to God. His offerings come in the form of attempting to incubate, or force God to grant him audience through the multitude of sacrifices at the approved altar. The feast he provides the population is extremely generous, and Solomon takes to sleep before God's altar in plea for God's blessing upon his political reign. The strangest thing about this passage is that God chooses to answer Solomon in blessing!

By all rights, Solomon had left off seeking God until he had nothing else to do and nowhere else to turn for security and safety. Some time has passed since David's death and the consolidation of power he has enacted through various strategies, including the marriage to Pharaoh's daughter. We can be pretty sure that was not a weekend elopement. Solomon comes to Yahweh almost as an afterthought. He comes in a demonstration of power, wealth, and with the same can do attitude of "taking the bull by the horns." He feels he has earned the right to demand audience with God, and that God must answer.

God does answer, anyway.

Doubtless, God is not impressed, as we might be. God simply wanted to grant him audience. As Micah will remind us, what need has Yahweh of sacrifices of thousands of animals? Such antics do not make right our sins and shortcomings. What God really wants is our humility in coming before him in an attitude of dependence. Even that, Solomon is unable to do! Solomon comes in an attitude of superiority, power, privilege, but God answers him anyway with the desire to grant blessing!

Effectively, Solomon says, "I have done everything I know to do to establish security for my reign over Israel, but now I am at a loss and finally turn to God. Help!" God simply responds, "So glad you have turned to me. I will indeed help, just because you have asked."

God was not so concerned with Solomon's motivation. God was not so concerned with defining the extent of Solomon's guilt or justice. We are the ones so concerned with assessing the justice or guilt of others. Deep down, we want to paint others as guilty or righteous in a manner that makes us feel better about ourselves. Our response to Solomon or the jury on the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case has more to do with how we perceive ourselves than a critical assessment of the events leading to the death of a young man.

Like Solomon, we find ourselves at wit's end, seeking a way forward that offers us a measure of comfort and security. Perhaps our motives aren't really so mixed, after all. Our concern is not so much with God's direction and assessment of our justice. It has more to do with convincing ourselves and others of our own worth and value. It has more to do with building a greater sense of security for ourselves. We want hard fast definitions of black and white, good and bad that paint us in the category of the righteous. Is it not enough to find that God's grace is sufficient, even amid our impure motives?

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